

"Come on, little brother, it's time to go home." He felt a hand on his shoulder. He shook it off and slumped. His eyes burned with spent tears.

"Where is that, exactly?"

Bourne shook his head, "don't be like that."

"Like what?" Oneon sneered. He turned away. "Is she there?"

"No, she ... not she's not." He sighed and put his arm back around his brother's shoulder, turning him away from the edge, leading him back inside. Inside the skeletal remains of a building half built. A creation started for a grand purpose and never finished, now just a bunch of concrete and rebar and unrealized possibility. It may as well have been a metaphor for Oneon's entire life, all thirteen or so years. "What is your first memory?" He choked out the words, barely audible, but his older brother caught them.

Or perhaps he did. He paused but then kept walking. Oneon kept his head down, his fists clenched, his muscles burned with his eyes. He dug his nails into his palms and squeezed those eyes looking down but nowhere. He wanted so badly to hit him, punch his brother full in the face, but he knew it was useless. Bourne would simply grab his wrists and say something belittling him. He was powerless against this handsome figure that bore only a passing resemblance to himself. He was wearing his red scarf and his sunglasses, at night, or ... almost night. Oneon didn't understand how he could see or if it was just part of his act as someone much stronger and cooler than him. He didn't care anymore, he didn't care about anything. He just wanted to slip off that edge and speed up this freefall, find an end to it, and choose it himself.

They passed pillars of steel and stone, whistling in the twilight wind. These were solemn figures that had watched the passage of time for less than a century but had all the elegance of a sewer rat and all the station of an ancient ~~oak~~ oak. Leaves mixed as flavor to the tea of air and flew hopelessly down to the ground so many floors below, spread thin on man's vast city, man's outpost, man's arrogance against his own demise. Everything is always falling, falling apart, dropping, landing, and sucking below the surface. Oneon could not understand it. And he didn't care. He felt a touch of water drip onto his leg but there was no moisture in the air, he felt his chest constricted and blown apart, stabbed and slashed, and he wanted to dig his heart out of his chest.

They walked down stairs half-finished, but more finished than anything else. There is always a way to climb up the tallest structure being built before it gets anywhere close to completion, and we have here stairs. Shoots and ladders. The radio continued broadcasting the dry speeches and champagne toasts of the city's government, its fancy ball, its magnates. The talking spoke against a backdrop of crackling and an occasional cough of gypsies lounging besides their barrel fires. Oneon had a sudden urge to run directly into them, to throw himself away, or to prove himself against impossible odds.

Buildings = skeletons, city = graveyard  
Bourne = handsome, smart, cynical



"My first memory," a dry voice began, puffed up by its own baritone. "My first memory was and has always been to pursue science and use it to better mankind, to improve our lives." That did not make any sense, that wasn't a memory at all; that was a dream, an intention, and a lame plan.

"My first memory was sitting on my father's lap, watching him architect the future we know live in." No that wasn't it. "From there was born my dream to pimprove that future, to make our lives better, and to work towards restoring man's place on earth." That wasn't it either. Oneon could not recall his first memory, but he didn't care. It must have been something to do with his mother cuddling him, he his brother teasing him, or the father he never met looking down at him in disappointment. It didn't matter and he didn't care.

Legs dangled over the precipice of the unfinished skyscraper, wind dancing with their movement. He looked out over the vast pit of a darkening city, into the lights of the nicer areas, and down the slums of merely sketched construction left to the elements and the brutality of humans on the edge. His palms were cold against the stone, rough, elbows turned behind him into the granite and rebar monster, face turned out to the edge of everything. Night approaching, blackness, and innumerable floors below. He did not know how high he had climbed. The breeze up here became an intermittent torrent, gods straining to keep us from such a height, and carried with it a ghostly whistle. It hurt his ears, cold ears, the freezing temperatures stabbing into his head, but the sound was not loud. He recognized it for the call of his ...

"Ah, well," a dirty man coughed, spittling running into a scraggly beard. "It seems we have visitors. Perhaps charitable ones who would like to spare a few credits in exchange for the warmth of our fire and the hospitality of our company?" He chuckled and wiped his face with a meaty, grimy paw.

"No," Bourne said, putting his glasses into his pocket. "We are just passing through." They did not stop moving as he said this, but he had to apply pressure to Oneon who was slowing down, resisting the hand leading him on.

"Even that will cost you." It might have been the same man for all they knew, the voice behind them threatening. No, not threatening, an intent becoming action. Shoes scuffed the dusty floor and the slithering sounds of butts lifting from uncomfortable seats mingled with their coughs, grunts, and hiss of metal objects dragged up as well.

"Run!" Bourne shoved Oneon forward as he turned to face the mob.

"No, I can take care of myself!" He spun around as well, he wanted so badly to hit something, to take all this rage out on someone, to show that he wasn't so weak. He saw a half-dozen filthy men fanning out in a semi-circle, silhouettes against the barrel fire behind them, brandishing pipes and knives and grimy limbs with nothing to lose and everything to gain.

"Dammit, BB, RUN!" Bourne rushed the closest man who immediately brought his hands to protect his face, and dropped his weight into a fist on his knee. He inadvertently screamed and reached downward as Bourne swung up with his left and smashed him full in the chin. Two men grabbed him from behind, another went for Oneon, and a third rushed up to Bourne, wielding a pipe.

Oneon saw red, tears exploded from his face, muscles contorted into an expectant and frightened grimace as his attacker grinned, stalking towards him. He lashed out with a fist that found purchase in the man's chest but did not register any pain. Except his arm which suddenly filled with pain, hot, liquid, laser-like. He doubled over as a knee found his gut.

Bourne yanked his right arm forward, the man holding it stumbled into the path of the pipe which met him in the temple and he crashed into the other man holding his left arm. They all began to fall sideways but Bourne wrested himself free and rolled backwards and up into a standing position, breathing hard, and pinning his target with fierce stare and scrunched eyebrows, a vein popping in his forehead, jaw taught with concentration. He flexed his right

Autumn, cold, falling, howling wind



t hand, raised before him, and there was a subtle but unmistakable grinding and popping of metal gears. The man paled, Bourne pulled up his left, protecting his face, and advanced with knees bent and shoulders bunched. There was an echo as the pipe hit the floor, tinkling, a pin dropping on cowardice.

"Oneon!" He had turned and rushed up to the pile of two people, his brother on the bottom. ~~and a~~ Suddenly the man leaned up and back, on his knees, and fell over sideways, eyes rolling back in his head, blood pouring from his nose. "I said I didn't need your help!" Oneon screamed, wiping tears from his face, and struggling to stand up, gripping his side. His eye was puffed up and blood ran from a cut on his lip. ~~He~~

"Oh my god," Bourne murmured, kneeling to touch the gypsy's still chest. "I think you killed him."

"So?" Tears continued streaming down his face, "I don't care."

He got up and ran, his legging legs pumping adrenaline alone as he flew through floors and stairs and rooms and passages, riding an angry elemental force and forgoing all physical sensation. He felt only pain, inside and out, his mind was exploding, his arm ached, his eyes and lips burned, and he felt as though he were floating through the world, a ghost, untouchable, invisible as he had always been, unloved, and unloveable, weak and corporeal.

Then he was at his door, their door. He shook his head. She wasn't there. He didn't see the familiar rooms, he was just pushing his face down into the pillow, the only kisses he would ever know. He sobbed, wheezing into the blankets and beating it with his fists as his lips tore and pulled back into a tortured grimace of pain. The muscles of his face contorted on the outside by the void on the inside, a blackhole yanking at the visage, a young boy tearing apart.

"Hello?" He heard a girl's voice but did not move. He let his muscles all relax in dreaminess, loosen into a corpse's sullen expression, air escaping in a long sigh. "The door was open, I..." it was closer, she was closer. He knew who it was. He felt an arm on his back as a body pressed down the bed near him, he smelled her, he imagined her softness, his dream sitting so near and torturing all the more than if she had been a world away, or if he were dead. She ran her hand down his back, back and forth, rubbing but silent, unable to think of the words or perhaps just plying him. He didn't care anymore, did he? And if nothing mattered ...

He rolled away from her and sat up, battered and beaten by his own system, his own body betraying his weakness. His wavy black hair stuck to his thin smooth face, dried or drying mucus on its only decoration. Eyes ringed by red, gray eyes, piercing eyes, the kind of eyes that stare from any distance and still make you shiver for all their depth, doorways to an agonized soul. They didn't question as they normal did, they were set and ruling. Nicky could only stare back. That kind of stare, the locking of two souls, two eyes, is a measure of infinity whether in reality it lasted a minute or a second, it was forever. Hew had never been able to hold it before.

He leaned forward towards her face, his right hand beat him to it, and she did not turn away when it landed on her cheek, she just closed her eyes and his leaps beat with his heart as they touched hers. Her lips parted slightly and he breathed into them.

"BB -" he leapt back, eyes alighted with a blazing fury, mouth tearing open to say - what? No there was no time, the door burst inward, knocking over the dining room table and sliding with a crunch into the corner.

Mystery Kiss Let. Nicole vs Katie (5)



Behind the explosion of cheap wood and iron hinges, a gold-ringed fist pulled back into a large, beige trench coat as a large, square man walked swiftly into the room, straight up to Oneon, and grabbed him. The squatter one had Oneon, the puncher grabbed Nicky who was squealing in fright. His rounded face lay on a rectangular frame, pinched by too much food, flusued with a lack of strenuous cardio, and sprouted by curly brown hair that expressed itself from the top of his head as well as his eyebrows. He grinned in a none too comforting way and it too was pinched as if this did not delight him in the slightest.

...

Before Oneon could react or move there was a singular sound and suddenly he seemed to hear nothing and could not move. It was a CTCHING that brought the entire world to a halt and his muscles with it. Two men stepped in, one after the other: a squat one and a taller, rectangular one who had busted in the door; he pulled back a gold-ringed fist while moving forward. The squat one with the tired, wooden face grabbed Nicky and the other, pinched and rosy topped with curly hair & held Oneon. "Hello," the big face said to him, breaking into a red grin that looked uneasy, disgusted.

Nicky tried to squeal and Oneon started to speak, but meaty paws covered their mouths. The tall one shook his head with that same uncomfortable smile that sat awkwardly on his puffy face of a rectangular frame. "Please, no talking," he went on in a thick Russian accent. "You," he pointed at Oneon. "are a ghost. You already are dead. It's like, for example, if you were to make fuss and we killed you - ther is no crime, because there is no person dead; only a ghost." They stopped struggling against their captors but they saw no guns. As if in reply, he the tall one shifted so his beige trench coat fell open to reveal a very large pistol, one suited for his size.

Still holding Oneon with one arm, he fished a cigarete from a pocket and lit it. Oneon's mind was not here, he wasn't thinking in the present, but even as distant as he was it was otherwordly to witness. No one smoked anymore except crimincals and the filthy rich; it was too expensive of a habit. He shook with adrenaline and malice. He was angry with Nicky but she was a thing to pity right now, a doe with dinner plate eyes, and innocent tears spraying her captor's hand and leaking down over his black leather gloves.

"We're looking for illegal technology. Technology that has been stolen from ... from great man. Since you are not properly registered," he exhaled smoke on his victim. "We merely ask for it back." I'm going to let you speak now, but if you scream or make problem then you simply die. Ok? So..." He uncupped his palm from Oneon's mouth, the other man did not remove his from Nicky's. "Freeman will not harm her," he responded to Oneon's look.

"I don't care." Nicky's eyes squeezed shut and she shook her head, fresh tears running down her cheeks. "She doesn't care about me, I don't care about her."

"Okay, so, where is mother then?"

"Work." Gumbo raised his eyebrows. "Secotor 5, at the hostpial or one of the clinics there ... or one of her boyfriends."

"What we are curious about is that school says there are two boys here which go to school there. However, this is not what records say. It says there is onely one boy registered & here for living in Core City. Where is other boy?"

"I don't know."

"Are you ~~Ber~~ Bourne?"

Gumbo = rectangle, Freeman = square  
Missing Like Desc.



12/20

## TRANSFORMATION

5

"Then you must, let me see, you must be 'BB'." I admit we do not under-"  
"No!" Oneon wrested fr3ee of his greip, his brain burned and his arms felt like flamethrowers. "Nooo!"

"I AM NOT MY BROTHER!" He yelled nbut did not hear himself yell. In his scre m there was only a rushing in his ears, a tearing in his body, yes someone had grabbed his arms and wear ripping at them. Someone had grabbed his thumbs and finger and were pulling them apart, twisting, shredding, the vessels and flesh splitting like string cheese. He saw only stars in the universe of the room, a light blackness engulfed everything, he smelled smoke or steam or something explosive. He smelled iron, he heard screaming that was not his own, and he saw light, heard light, some bassy explanation of light, and then he felt something hit the back of his head and the light went out.

Sticky, cheek, he was peeled back from the floor and his eyes fluttered upon opening. The room faded back into t view, clarifying, and he shook his head to clear it more. He was coughing, he reached to rub this gunk out of his eyes anbd felt a cold barrel (hot?) of smooth metal touch. An odd canon stared back at him from the end of his arm, streaked with red, streaked with his blood. The room pulsed with Nicky's muffled screams, eyes shut tight, flailing against the square man holding her captive easily.

"I am thinking we find Onyx," Gumbo said, stooping to pick up his cigarette and loosely holding the limp Oneon in his other arm. Freeman rolled his eyes, but a subtle grin touched his features, out of place amongst the board of his other, unmoved features. "Let us go, now."

The limb holding Oneon felt like an immovable vice and he could feel the gold rings digging into his chest as he was hoisted up and carried with that one arm like so much dust on a mantle. He gazed stupidly down at his arm with the gun barrel end protruding from his forearm, he could not understand it. How long had it been there, where was his hand, and why was this new part of him larger than the last? They left the wrecked apartment and headed out into the hall, towards the elevator. Nicky kept her eyes pressed tightly shut but she wiggled wildly, perhaps not against her attacker but to get away from him. Her captor stumped along, Freeman as he was called, just behind Gumbo who chatted amicably with his fellow, still wearing that puffy uncomfortable look of general t distaste although his words were optimistic and chatty. His back was to his friend but Oneon could see Freeman's bored look on a wooden board fase and hear his low sighs that Gumbo cared not, or did not, notice. Beneath his gray trenchcoat there was some kind of hump on his back that did not move in sync with the rest of his body. A backpack perhaps? He needed both his w arms to hold Nicky.

Dirty wqalls stared at them as they made their waly down the long hallway. The buildings of the poor had a single elevator and not a vcery large one at that. They crammed into this with Gumbo muttering his obvious distaste. "This is not very good, you know?" Freeman rolled his eyes and tried with futility to back himself up against the back wall of the elevator as the doors bounced back open for the second time. Gumbo chuckled. "It's like your back is too fat." Freeman grunted and moved against the corner so they faced each other diagonally, the two kids were mashed together in front of them and Oneon could feel Nicky tremble, hear her whimper, and even taste the salt of her wet face against the bloodiness of his.

Gumbo takes out earplugs



The elevator door shut and they began moving down. Out here on the fringe of the city people kept to their own, protected their own, and did not rely on the Kops nor interfere with whatever criminal element operated in their midst. Thus it wasn't unusual that no one came to investigate the noises that had been heard only moments before and they saw no one in the hallway or near the elevator. If people were home, and many were here, then they were silent behind their doors, waiting for this storm to pass so they could get on with surviving... or playing video games. Oneone imagined the worst part of this for them was having to silence their distractions temporarily in order to remain inconspicuous, conveniently removed from the occurrences happening just outside their door. He couldn't blame them. His family had done the same thing on many occasions and he didn't know if it bothered him or not, but he knew it grated on his brother Bourne.

Going down, falling. In an elevator you're falling slowly, especially in this old carriage that enveloped them now, more as a trap than a decent method of transportation. Gumbo seemed to agree with him and not even silently as his fellow thug, Freeman, who merely breathed, through his nose, quietly but distinctly. Gumbo talked of grilled cheese sandwiches and other nonsense, implying the name was fitting as toasted cheese if they're made on a grill. Oneon could not pay attention. Breath, tears, whimpering... the girl of his dreams was scared of him more than these thuggish invaders and who was he, what was this thing on his arm? His arm? He could not look in such a closed space but he could close his fingers, yes, but were those ghost limbs? How long had he had a cybernetic appendage? His brother had always had one and he had been envious, not just of the arm, but certainly of that as well. Why would they care about his rather than his brother's and where was Bourne?

There was a zap and a hiss and the elevator didn't grind to a halt nor did it jarringly stop, rather it just ceased to move. A dull lamp faded into being above their heads as the brighter, fluorescent lights switched off in tune to the movement ending. Oneon could not tell what floor they were on, but he knew it must be ten o'clock, the power had been shut off to the outer districts. Gumbo swore, his tense smile transforming completely into disgust. Normally one could open a compartment whereby a manual pulley system could be operated but they were in too tight a position to do anything of the sort. "Not very good design," he complained shifting to become perpendicular to the door.

Oneon heard a click and felt a whoosh as the arm holding him jerked left and then smashed right, elbowing the door, it crumbled outward and screamed in metal terror, a honking groan as it gave way to an immense pressure punctuated by a breathy sigh of hydraulics. He used his shoulder to push the door open further and ducked out into the next floor, gripping the boy as a ragdoll.

Out in the corridor there was no light at all, it lit them from behind, the weak bulb from the elevator, a solar-charged battery thing that had saved the remnants of the day to shine as a dying star in this dark passageway during the night. Their hulking forms with dangling things cast looking, alien shadows that faded into the maw ahead, everything invisible, Oneon had always been invisible. He wiggled his ghost hand beneath the veil of sightlessness, trying to feel where the steel ended and his arm, his real arm, began. Gumbo trod forward without slowing as he entered the darkness and continued talking. Oneon imagined Freeman was still rolling his eyes and he heard the stumping behind him, heard the whimpering, and knew that Nicky had stopped struggling. They clomped down stairs, stone stairs, the kind that did not creak but rather scuffed and scraped and collected dust.



Oneon had intended to fall this night, but faster and farther. Now rather than the sensation of dropping, giving it all up, he felt a melancholy curiosity, a restoration of some lost faith. The feeling switched into excitement and his heart began to beat with anticipation and adrenaline. He flexed his toes now, moved his eyebrows, and stretched his back. Gumbo gripped him tighter and he wheezed as the air was pushed out of his lungs. His lungs, he was breathing he was alive and he had done something with his arm, something amazing. Perhaps it was enough to overcome these evil men, these goons, these interruptors of intimate moments. Not even his brother could overpower these guys, he was sure of it, but maybe he could. And then maybe Nikcy would not be scared of him, she would fall deeply and irrevocably in love with him. He just had to wait for his moment. He had time to think, it was ~~i~~ easy to ignore the banal one-sided conversation originating from the swaying giant that held him and there must be several flights of stairs-

"Ah, bathrooms, we go too far. Back up one." The zero floor, below the first was reserved for toilets and showers and that served the entire building. Oneon's mind raced and he thought he could see a door, the door to the outside, yes, and there were lights flashing through it. Blue, red, Kops! If he hoped against a confrontation, hoped for help then he was not given it because Gumbo did not slow his pace. "Be ready," Gumbo said with a terse sideways nod to his companion beside and behind him. He squinted his eyes in his pinched face and popped his neck, Oneon felt him move his arms in a simple flexing motion, he became scared again. This was too much.

The double doors slammed open and hinges squealed, Oneon thought he heard them whistle. He was blinded by pulsating lights, rotating on the backs of Kops cycles, blue red and spinning. There were perhaps four of them and a fifth, a tall woman in a burnt Sienna uniform of strange texture strode up straight backed to Gumbo, up the few front steps to meet his eye within the space of a foot or two. Her gaze was unflinching and a sardonic half-smile touched her lips, dirty blond hair falling carelessly from a loose pony-tail.

"Are we late to the party, Gumbo?" Oneon's stomach sank.

"We are having interrogation," Gumbo replied directly. "You can maybe help later."

"Oh no, I think we need to know now. Some little fireworks display lit up several buildings around here so if you were trying to be subtle then I'm afraid you missed the definition. Who are these children?"

"This is not your business"

"Yes, it is. Hand them to us and we will discuss this back at Central."

"You are not wanting to do this, Sam."

She laughed mirthlessly but genuinely, a paradoxical combination. "Let them go NOW." The smile fell away from her face and she reached behind her shoulder. "I don't care what William told you to do, he is not in charge of the peace - not that he would know what that is."

Oneon felt his skin prickel and the ambient sounds seemed to die away, fading as memories ~~of~~ to the ghosts of the dead city and he could see their breath, clouds of dead steam from live bodies. Sam's eyes narrowed, her arm moving swiftly to pull something off her back, but stopped quickly in an instant clenched by that same CTCHING he'd heard before, as a bicycle gear catching, made of indestructable glass smashed together. CTCHING! She froze.

A swift punch and Oneon fell from Gumbo's grasp as his right arm swung around and slammed his fist into her shoulder directly across from him. He didn't have far to fall but it seemed to take forever and he thought he saw stars, or fairies, little blots of light attracting to the spot, no congregating in front of him at Freeman who had dropped Nicky and was pulling that large, bulky thing from his back, under his coat. A giant gateline gun appeared and all the laser-light spots were sucked into its spinning muzzle.



The sound of a massive waterfall spraying shards of glass struck his ears and erupted about him. Freeman swung first to the right and moved the man-sized weapon steadily leftwards, sparring sheets of a storm of razor projectiles that cut the air and devastated the law enforcement standing stock still until their cumpling demise. The noise was incredible, as a motor running on too high a gear and non-stop. Oneon clenched his teeth and covered his ears almost involuntarily. Both hands cupped - hands, his right hand was there but now it was cold, dark blue steel, opaque and grooves so fine he could not see anything mechanical about it except that it was not human flesh.

A shadow loomed over him and he looked up to see Gumbo reaching for him and Nicky who was just staring in shock at everything occurring. Immediately he felt a surge of protective responsibility and wanted badly to stop this, to save her, to do SOMETHING. He felt his will coalescing into an indescribable welling within him as a previously latent muscle filling with blood and energy and he pulled at this handle, scratched it, and time elongated as this awful face rose over him, slowed down in his mind, and becoming paler in the light. The light! He rolled away, a sideways scuffling, and instinctively pulled his arm back away from him, behind him, his human hand raised with splayed fingers at his attacker who grinned disdainfully and continued encroaching then stopped in some surprise, those pinches loosening just enough to show surprise.

Oneon could feel a cooling sensation as déjà vu rushing through one, as a wave of relief or a tickle of inspiration, and down his spine up into his shoulders, out into his arm, and he could see his shadow grow up in front of him, a black inky soldier lunging at this impossibly huge and immobile thing threatening him, threatening his girl, and he wanted to save this life, save his life, and he knew the shadow was cast by his light, by his arm which was now a raging blaze ready to be brought forward.

Gumbo skidded to a stop and shielded himself as Oneon shot his arm out in front of him, turning his wrist upward, and firing several thumping blasts from the preformed canon sparkling at the end of his arm. Three. One, two, three. Each one a comet, releasing a crackling boom that shook their feet and Oneon had trouble keeping his footing. His hair brushed his clenched teeth, his eyebrows tried to crush his face with their glare, and he let out a howl of triumph in this newfound power which slammed against Gumbo, sizzling, throwing him up and backwards, shreds of his coat whirling off into the crisp air from beige to blackened ash. But Freeman was now facing him with an answer of his own that had begun spinning once more and frightened bits of starry light coalesced into the gateline gun that whined as it wound up to destroy him.

SMASH! A red streak of cloth and leather flew threw the air, propelled by flinging himself off his motorcycle, Bourne threw his body into Freeman. He had his helmet on, sunglasses, and looked like a superhero of old, if only he had had a cape. He pressed his knee down into Freeman's chest as the gun splayed off sideways with his arm and fired uselessly into the sky. Bourne kicked it against the ground and drew back his fist to strike at his face when he was yanked off by Gumbo, blackened and scowling, his chest a goopy mess of bubbling flesh and ... metal? What was going on?

Two star-shaped blades appeared in Gumbo's back and he growled, spinning around and Bourne swiped him with his fist, pushing him backwards. He leapt off in the diversion. "Oneon! Let's get out of here!" Freeman scrambled Nicky screamed and a shadowy willowy figure emerged swiftly from the darkness outside the oasis of flashing lights and sounds. An Asian face swept a terse glance over the scene and rushed to Sam who was holding a sword from her back and struggling to rise.



12/21

# RON / NIGHT CYCLE

9

"Well, looks who's all gussied up for the ball, Cinderella." She grunted.

"If the shoe fits," he said helping her up. "My prince, you must wear it." He straightened his dark purple suit, nearly black, and turned towards the two thugs facing him. "Hassan sends his regards," he said without turning around and stalking lithely towards the two men who were fanning out to either side. "You owe me."

"Show off," she muttered. Oneon had grabbed bourne's motorcycle and looked around but Nicky had disappeared, fled probably back to her home. "What the fuck is that thing?" Sam nodded at the bike as she hobbled up to it, behind her there were sounds of gunfire and traded blows but she did not bother to see and it was all happening too fast for Oneon.

"Scoot back," Bourne said.

"No, get on, I ~~am~~ want to drive."

"This is no time to act like a brat, BB!"

"Fuck you!"

"Both of you shut up and get me ~~h~~ out of here," Sam grabbed BOURNE and pulled him onto the seat in front of her, ponytail flipping around as she got on. Oneon fired up the enging and sped off, the sidewalk and street rattling around him as new shards of ice raked the surface just beyond them.

"What about that guy?" Bourne shouted above the sound of the old combustion engine, grinding and straining under the weight of three passengers.

"Ron can take care of himself, he's dressed for it besides."

"What-y did we just leave him?"

"I need to get back to CEntRAL now! Fucking bastards just slaughtered a squad of my men with that crazy fucking artillery. This is now time to fuck around - FUCK!"

"What's that sword thing?"

"This is supposed to be my damn weapon, but it's not working." Stop asking so many questions, kid, let me ~~kh~~ink."

Oneon was still but the earth moved beneath them and crowds of people flowed past like stalks in a wheat field, s zombies in a graveyard. Hew wseaved among them, down the street, near the canal, there were no cars here. Cars were practically illegal they were so expensive to drive, maintain, and license. A few cycles passed them in the opposite direction but for the most part they were they only wheeled transporation. A train rumbled underneath them as they went up and over a bridge and the crowds got thicker. Curfew was upon the city and people were rushing from their jobs or the bar or some other place they had lingered too long to get home before some self-righteous Kop decided to make a nuisance of himself and bust them. It was the same everyday, people always push the limits, try to game the system. The crowds grew thicker and Oneon had trouble maneuvering the bike. He blamed th3e number of people, he blamed bourne for yelling directions in his ear, for this albeit pretty woman yelling things to Bourne. He could only half hear what they were saying.

"Where are we going?" He yelled back.

"Central."

"Central? Are you sure/" Central was a building at, strangely enough, the center of Core City and it housed all the government and military (or rather, militia) at the source of the metropolis. It was the beating heart as well as the brain. Oneon imagined that if the city were a living organism it would look rather strange and be quite vulnderable. However it was probably more than half of the security and firepower that went into protecting it and aircraft were so few that it seemed improbably that it would ever be attacked that way.



Oneon wasn't sure if he cared. Of course he had kept saying that and now he was driving his brother's bike with him and an important stranger and his arm was made of metal, grippping the handlebar so tightly he thought he felt that handle starting to give way as if he was holding onto a plastic straw, he loosened his grip. He wondered where Nicky was, he resented the older brother behind him, yelling directions, telling him to turn this way or that way and to slow down and why didn't you use that street. Admittedly he didn't know how to get to Central but that was not something he was about to admit aloud, especially to his nemesis.

People stared at them and cursed as he felt their clothes whip his face, every one seemed close to colliding with them and there were bigger and bigger packs of them. Everyone was rushing, they were rushing, and the air was rushing but Oneon's chest felt still. The itching and pain he had always felt inside had simply ceased for this moment. He was in purgatory on the move. He could no longer detect a trace of handle within him, something to grab, an itch inside that he could not scratch.

Slow down!" Bourne yelled but it was too late and they rode over the hump of a bridge at high speed causing them to catch air on the other side. Oneon had not been paying attention and now they were actually flying on a cycle over the heads of people looking up in astonishment, deer in headlights, he thought he felt the front tire connect with something but then miraculously they landed on the pavement. People might have also been shocked that this smelly beast even existed, much less was being driven. Combustion motors were illegal in all parts of the city but in the outer sectors it was usually cheap enough to bribe curious Kops rather than pony up for an expensive, frictionless cycle. The electric ones were clean and quiet, except for the sirens on the Kop bikes, but they were also weaker and Oneon was not used to the speed at which he was going. He wasn't used to driving in general, being only thirteen - or nearly thirteen - and having little experience with it. Sirens, he heard them now, and peered in a side mirror expecting to see cycles in pursuit. His body came back to life with his stomach sinking into his bowels as he saw a car, a real car, encroaching upon the space behind them.

"What the fuck?" He heard Sam say. One of her arms gripped Bourne and the other was on her own shoulder which must have been the one that Gumbo had hit. She was rubbing it and glaring furiously at the approaching vehicle, the vehicle gaining speed. People dove out of the way, the crowds surged and screamed, you would have thought a dinosaur had been resurrected and was charging, blood thirsty, through them and in a way that was the case. "Well, shit." Sam added, then: "Turn, fuck!"

It was too late, a tight corner a raced up to them and Oneon turned the bike too sharply. They went into a slide and crashed up against the wall, Sam rolled off the bike and Bourne struggled to pull Oneon free, whose legs were underneath one side of it. An old metal bike meant it was heavier but he was able to lift it easily using his right arm. The car pulled up a short distance away separated from them by Sam, standing straight in front of them, legs slightly apart, and holding the sword in front of her with both hands. She was swearing at it. "Come on you toothpick, give me some fire."

They could hear sirens in the distance as both front doors open and Gumbo got out of the driver's side, Freeman out of the passenger's. There was blood on the windshield which was also cracked and blood on the thugs whose faces were far from happy. Gumbo's pinched face had darkened into a scrunched frown, jaw set, fingers flexing, his coat hanging off him in tatters. Freeman had no hump on his back but he too was flexing his hands in anticipation. A crackling pop resounded and the dim street lit up with an orange flickering glow from Sam's blade. "About fucking time."



"It's like she thinks we are afraid of Sunblade," Gumbo said in his lilting Russian without changing expression. He drew a large pistol from a holster. No sooner had he begun this than Sam lay the blade across her forearm, pointing the tip towards them, and Oneon saw briefly a barrel, fine and thin, rested between the sides of the blade barely perceptible, and from that a reverberating flash, the sound of a welder's torch, and a flat-shaped blast of fire shot out past Gumbo and hit a shop sign behind him which exploded into a universe of sparks; he did not change expression. Freeman snorted.

"Maybe you'll be afraid of this," Oneon said, his heart thumping and he felt his muscles spasming in fear, but he stood next to Sam and transformed his right hand into a cannon. This time he saw it clearly, it spun into shape like a fancy collinder, unveiling a strip of lights on the outside, and a blue-silver rim. Inside he felt his fist twist and burn and the end of it felt like a lit torch on his arm that felt like power, strength, and a beacon for these things, his flag or totem. He could not feel his fingers. It was as if they had been taped together too long and gone numb.

"Ha!" Gumbo laughed and Freeman rumbled with him, without opening his mouth. Oneon felt Bourne standing beside him and an arm reach up to his shoulder but then drop back. He smelled the iron of the blood and sickly smoke from the burning sign and felt the dry crusty blood still flecking off his arm. His human arm began somewhere up the sleeve he could not see and was afraid to. There was a handle within him and he latched onto it, he pulled as one would pull a muscle long dormant but ever present. Now it was more difficult than before, to summon the willpower without the aid of anger, the rush of adrenaline had turned into anxiety, and he scaled a cliff to dig deep from the well within. He- His skin prickled as a wave of sensation washed over him and he saw their eyes widen as a thrumming sound caught his ear and rising light caught his eye.

Gumbo's eyes narrowed and he looked at Freeman who nodded. He smiled, an unfriendly smile, they got back into the car and closed the doors, reversing its direction and turning around into the now-empty streets. Thousands of eyes probably watched them from the windows and the sirens were closer but the streets were devoid of people.

"Let's go," Sam said sheathing her weapon and climbing back onto the bike.

"Aren't we going to wait for the Kops?"

"Those two were Kops as well, you think I want to risk seeing others I don't trust? Come on, I'll drive."

"Oneon climbed onto the seat behind her and relaxed his hand back into fingers, he felt his brother sit behind him and breath out a bursting sigh. They all held each other tightly to fit on the bike and he could feel his brother's heart beating like a kickdrum. "Why are they chasing me?"

"Beats me, but I haven't seen this kind of action in ages." Sam's ahir whipped him in the face but it was not unpleasant. For all her roughness, her hair still smelled good and felt soft when it wasn't cracking like a whip up his nose. A loose hairtye was unable to keep it in check.

"What are we going to do?"

"First find people we can trust then figure out who we can't, and arrest them. Easy peasy."

"Who do you trust?"

Sam sighed. "Kid, where is your parents?"

"Our mom is at work and we don't have a dad," Bourne cut in.

"Working? Past curfew?"

"Yeah," Oneon added. He didn't feel like discussing that with a stranger.

"Well, until we figure out what they want with you, you'll have to stay with me. I'll see about contacting her once we get to central."



Oneon found it hard to concentrate on being there, on the back of the motorcycle whirring through the empty, dark streets. He felt thousands of eyes upon them. He heard the sirens wailing, ever in the distance, and the healthy thrum of the old gasoline engine, pavement skirting beneath the air-filled rubber tires as they smoothly ascended bridges, crossed canals, and whipped around corners. The headstones of the city's high rises rose around him bowing in under the crisp autumnal moon which winked in the haze of nighttime clouds, blurred at the edges in burning cyan light, as if the sky were smudged with petroleum. He was not there, he was back on the rooftop looking over this scene. He was watching this tiny, ancient vehicle as a spot of light far below on the grid of streets. He was somewhere else, in the streets of his mind which ran in circles rather than these square blocks.

Falling, bereaving, remembering. The question of why and a million others touched him and brushed their frustration before rushing off. He had never been so lost. No, that was a lie, he had felt lost for some time now. At some point his mother stopped paying attention to them, stopped paying attention to him, and his brother as well. Whereas once they were an inseparable duo, now they had become nemesis, Bourne the smothered and Oneon the smothered. A stranger now led them to the center of the city, named for it being exactly what it was, and he had changed but he did not feel different, only confused about how he was, who he was. Was the question not "who" then rather than "why"? Why me...

He could see the outlines of greenery against the deep sapphire night sky, the rooftop gardens waving to each other across the expansives dividing the buildings. He wondered how if he were chasing or being chased, if those eyes watching them came also from those armies of plants perched atop all the buildings of this cold, gray, plain city. This square trap of human decadence. He no longer wanted to hit anyone, to punch his brother, ... he wanted to hide.

"We're almost there," Sam said nodding her head at the monstrosity looming before them. It appeared to be trapped itself, like a giant tied down against its will, surrounded by stakes. Stone stakes, giants fenced in too. Whereas the headstones belied graves, this much taller structure sprouted innumerable cables and cable car transports to buildings around and lower than it; it seemed to be the only living thing, probably because it was the only building still fully lit up whereas most others were mostly darkened.

The top of Central was a large dome-like protrusion that reminded Oneon of a bubble. This was a missile, a thought, and a pulsing life amongst graves. Blue and red flashing lights greeted them near the base as several Kops, guards, approached them in starchy uniforms, grim faces, and weapons in hand. Plying Kops as kids, Oneon had wielded sticks nailed together to form guns, but these were real pistols and gave him none of the childish excitement, but rather a sickening sinking feeling of danger in his gut. They seemed to have run straight into the worst grouping, the most dense mob of exactly what they had been trying to avoid, and he couldn't but help wonder, to doubt Sam's plans and her intentions. Why had she brought them here? Where they going to jail? TO prison? No, that was ridiculous, it wasn't in the same building as the government, that was elsewhere. No one but those who had BEEN jailed knew where it was.

"Stay calm," Sam said parking the bike on the sidewalk; there was no distinction between street-level and pedestrian because there were very few person vehicles at all, and this one was clearly illegal. The men and women in uniform approaching obviously recognized their driver, however.

"Sir?" A very average looking man in a smart suit of a uniform asked.

"Ah E, I need to go to command immediately; these two are coming with me."



"I'm glad you were here to greet me."

"Of course, sir. News of this is all over the radio and the description of you stands out."

"Right, it would." She wore a crown of a helmet with orange and black flairs, her dirty blonde hair fitting out the back end of it with sharp triangular "wings" on the ears. The visor was also quite angular and gave her a glaring visage even though her mouth belied a dry amusement. They were walking now.

"Keep close," Bourne said in a low voice. It annoyed Oneon. How did he expect to take care of him now. Who exactly had the firepower among them now? He thought he must just be jealous, but his big brother was not looking at him, he was gazing all around him and he felt that his arm and his hand was just behind his back, although not quite touching. He felt like a child again and part of him wanted to embrace it and to lay his head on his brother's shoulder, but another stubborn splinter within him wanted more than to shake it off, and he still wanted to run away and be gone from all of this, wait for everyone to forget him and whatever this was to just blow over. It was too unreal, this just couldn't be happening anyway. He felt in a way that his entire life had been a dream so this wouldn't be something he could wake up from. He had always wanted to wake up and find things better than they were.

E was talking calmly and rapidly and they had a pace to match. Oneon kept up if only to keep ahead of Bourne's hand that at any moment would touch him and his heart beat with the thrill of anticipation, how would he react? Was his cannon-err hand somehow related to his brother's age-grown cybernetic arm? Some kind of gala was going on upstairs, at some higher floor, E was saying. Yes, that was what he had heard on the radio earlier. Some scientist named William accepting an award and talking nonsense about his earliest memories.

"It was the strangest thing, sir, but he ceased giving his speech around the time dispatch started all lighting ab up over the slaughter you just described

"That's suspicious, but it was his personal goons out there." Where is he now?"

"Sir, he's still at the gala and we have had no word from either Gumbo or Freeman or some other units either. We have not been able to tell if they were attacked as well or part of this mutiny."

"Shit, that's not good. I would have radioed earlier but that big bastard did a number of on my shoulder, oh yeah, and my radio. This god damn blade barely worked too. We should be testing these things. Shit, this is some serious shit."

"Yes sir, shit."

"Do we have any more armor?"

"Spare, sir? No, but there are a few members wearing it in Command."

"Okay, I think- let's get them to donate it to my new friends here. They are the target of this and I won't want them dying on me just yet until we can figure this out."

"Of course, sir. May I ask, who are these boys?"

"I think you'd better get someone on that, because I have no idea. One of them was in Gumbo's company, unwilling, and the other came blasting out on that ridiculous relic. Thank god for that shit, though, it really saved our ass. Where did they get the cruiser, I thought all of those had been decommissioned.

"They have, sir. We were unaware one was even active."

E talked briefly into his radio, giving the brothers a glance, and they continued speaking about the events, names of Kops involved in the attack, now presumed dead, and delegating office workers into a flurry of research to figure out the who, when, where, what. Oneon was glad they weren't questioning them directly, because he didn't know any of this himself.



He couldn't even remember how they got here, some well-lit hallway with people in offices, cubicles, nice wooden doors and carpeted floors. People strode about in smart suits with importance and a sense of gravity, no one slunk and no one seemed to be fucking around. They all nodded respectfully at Sam and often stepped to the side to let them pass. She walked with a fluid grace like a big cat, a panther or a tiger, loosely but with that same gravity, a predator searching for its prey in information, in the bushes of this mystery. He had remembered coming in through a rotating door and stairs ... or an elevator, he wasn't paying attention at all was he? He felt funny in here, almost nauseous, all of the events of the day and the night were a ball of discomfort in his gut, his bowels, and he wanted to sit and shut his eyes tight, alone. It was getting late now too and his head was groggy with exhaustion. When had he eaten? Had he eaten?

"Are you okay?" Bourne asked with concern shining in his eyes. Pretentious pity, no doubt, O'Neal thought. He doesn't really care, he just wants to see how weak I am so he can be the strong one and take care of me. Bourne had removed his helmet and was carrying it under his right arm, his leather coat creaking as he walked, his red scarf, the tattered thing was drooping and dragging on the floor from his right hand. It was hot in here, O'Neal just realized that he was sweating, but it was a cold sweat.

"Fine," he mumbled. He meant it to sound bigger, stronger, more confident but it came out as how insecure he was feeling, shaky, and sickly. Was his metal hand sickly too? He stared at it and pondered the flesh that had covered it not even a couple hours ago, not even an hour, how long had it even been? His blue sneakers cuffed the carpet as he walked, his mouth was dry and his throat hurt. He remembered he had been crying a lot and he was thirsty. It smelled stale in here, dead, dead like the buildings of the city and here he thought, from the outside, this looked to be the only one that was alive and now it turned out that it was as dead as any of them. Bourne's eyebrows were still scrunched up in that look of pitiful concern. O'Neal hated that look, but did he hate it more than that one of bossiness he so often wore or that sigh of contempt as if he couldn't possibly understand why he didn't want to do his every bidding exactly as he commanded it.

"Where are we going, who is this guy?" O'Neal popped off bitterly.

"Easy kid," Sam replied without turning around. She knew they were following close behind, did they have a choice? He glanced behind him and saw that no one was making sure they did, he wondered why he had been doing it all along and how she had assumed the lead so easily. Why "We're almost there. I lost good men today and I know you're scared, but this isn't the time to piss me off."

"You always have a way with people, sir." E added dryly, but he gave O'Neal a half smile and a wink. He almost smiled himself, but his tired anxiety kept it from reaching his features."

Sam snorted. "That reminds me, is my son okay?"

"Your husband called and asked about you, sounds like they're fine and no one has tried anything. We're keeping in contact."

"Ex."

"Sir?"

"He's my ex-husband... hell we should probably just use his name but I can't remember it for the life of me. We didn't exactly have a talky relationship."

"And you're all ears, sir."

"You're a rigot, E"

"Thank you, sir. And here we are, gentleman." He gave an expansive wave of his hand as he led them through what looked like a plain metal door into a round room of a half-dozen fancy-dressed men, a handful of armed guards, and a giant screen of various sections and diagrams and maps and stuff on the wall at the end.



"Get these boys some sandwiches or something," Sam said and a person rushed hurriedly off. "Welcome to Command, not many get to see this hit."

"You're quite privileged," E agreed.

"Why are you called 'E' and why do you call her 'sir'?"

"Oneon, be respectful-" Bourne started.

"I want to know and she brought us here without our permission, so why not?"

"E is ... special, and also I don't remember his full name, it's practically unpronounceable."

"Only to you, sir."

"The point is that he's used to addressing men and I let him have that convention because he's the only one I really trust."

"Thank s you sir,"

"Hey!"

"I trust you too, Jenkins... sort of. Any luck locating that cruiser.?"

"No, we didn't show it once on the scanners, it's practically invisible."

"Well I could see it and I'm not sure how you'd hide such an ugly thing."

They continued talking about the massacre and the thugs involved but Oneon wasn't paying attention to much of it. Someone brought him a sandwich and he barely tasted it as it disappeared in his hand, his metal hand. Strange, it seemed to be the same size as his other hand, but how was that possible? Had he never noticed that one was bigger? All that blood ... he had a hazy recollection of it spilling all over the floor, his forearm twisting as though a blender had been turned on within it, at the base of it. He now realized why his mother, Lilee, had ~~ne~~ always seen to their medical checkups herself, some other doctor would have noticed this and called the police. What was this about him not being registered, though? How else did he get into the school? He realized that Lilee might be the only ones to answer these and other questions, or maybe Bourne could too but he was the last person he would ever want to ask anything of, especially to help. Best not to show weakness around him.

He didn't care much for his mother either. At this point she wasn't much of a mother, what he saw at least, because he didn't see much of her at all. She was a nurse working in the hospital and often volunteering in other poor clinics at the fringe of Core city where people could not pay their tabs but still demanded medical attention. Injured and sickly people were always ~~to~~ so pushy about someone else healing them but then when it was said and done they rarely passed it forward to others.

Oneon supposed Lilee was a charitable type, but that didn't make her good at mothering, because that requires one to be present. And when she was she was distant. These days she would give him funny looks that didn't make him want to laugh and he doubted she ever laughed at all anymore. She had a beautiful Spanish face with an olive complexion that was now haggard from stress, from working too hard and staying out too long and, he thought bitterly, mistreating her kids. Bourne was practically his father now and he hated it, he was only three years older after all.

A soft bell tone emanated from somewhere on that giant wall-screen and an elderly man's face appeared. Well, he wasn't quite a senior citizen, but he carried a haughty dignity in his features and his voice was smooth but textured, pleasantly calm-sounding although the things he said were not so much. He wore a half-frown which gave his salt and pepper facial hair and handsome complexion a frightening sternness. His clear blue eyes were magnified, even taking up only a portion of the giant screen, and he bore down on Sam with them who stood her ground without flinching, yet standing with a slight stoop. Taken at face value it might have been relaxed but Oneon detected a charge in it, as muscles that wanted to spring and pounce and devour this man on the screen.



"What is going on, general? I hear there was some sort of massacre."

"Yes, William, well you should know - they were your damn flunkies afterall.

"What kind of allegations are these?" Oneon recognized the voice from the radio and in the background he could see a fancy dinner hall filled with fancy dressed suits and dresses, mingling, munching, and sipping from fancy glasses under a fancy chandeleir with a podium at the other ~~men~~ end.

"Cut the crap, Gumbo and Freeman just went awol fucking crazy, killing every one in a routine patrol and then stealing a cruiser for who fucking knows what reason."

"I certainly didn't authorize anything, I'm just a scientist, sir." He languished special inflection on the word.

Sam gritted her teeth, "Know your place, I'm the one in a uniform."

"And I'm the one in the lab coat, now do let's be civil about this. Did they give you any idea why they were doing this? We don't just hire ignorant thugs off the street."

"No, WE don't, Bill." Willy."

His face darkened, "I don't have time for this."

"You're the one that called me, baby."

"Yes, well-" and his giant pixeled eyes roamed the room, landing on Bourne who stood conspicuously straight, rubbing his shoulders with a red-gloved right hand, his feet apart only a foot behind Oneon who watched all this with only half an interest, his focus pointed inward. "And who are the young riders? New recruits?"

"Don't be ~~fa~~ daft, these are witnesses or perhaps the treasure themselves. We caught your bullies trying to drag one of them and-" Sam suddenly seemed to realize that Nicky had been among them on the steps and was not ~~now~~ present. Her brow came together, somewhat square chin working as her jaw flexed in thought, momentarily ignoring the big face.

William's eyes stared into Bourne's, "I see." Bourne stared back into William's. "It appears you do have something I want, in fact that IS mine and was stolen from me." His voice took on a far-off, almost dreamy quality as if he was speaking from a trance. "Who are you, boys? Name yourselves."

"I'm Bourne and this is my brother Oneon, sir."

"You don't have to call him sir," Sam said.

"No?" William raised his black eyebrows. "Maybe they should. Oneon, what an odd name."

"There's a lot of odd names since we can only have first names," Oneon said looking up, coming out of his introspective trance, the endless search for answers that oneself cannot answer in solace, alone, because they are about one's relation to the outside world.

"True enough, but most idiots just add an extra letter."

"You mean like 'Lilee'?"

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?!" William's decor, the shell of his face, seemed to slide away and reveal a hideous skull underneath. His bones were visible and the muscles of his face worked furiously, nearly ~~spinning~~



12/23

MURDER

12

hhh

Oneon's heart started to beat. Why had he gotten so angry all of a sudden? "Tell me, boy! Repeat that name!"

Sam and Bourne tried interjecting. "Why do you want to know about our mother" and "Settle down, fancy pants", but William yelled over them and Oneon quailed. "Mother? MOTHER!?"... And where is your mommy?"

"Why should we tell you anything?" Bourne yelled at the screen.

"Because I am in control and I demand to know, NOW."

"Really, Willy, this is no time to be mean. I think it's time you came down and-" Sam stopped as William stepped back from the screen pulling out a pistol.

"Let me show you just how serious I am, general." He fired a shot into the air and instant screaming began as the crowd went wild in a primal rush to save themselves. All except one man who sported a decent paunch, an arrogant stature, and he went straight up to William who was also looking at him.

"Pay attention, my little samurai."

"Now see here, William, what's the meaning of th-" BANG! A tiny red dot appeared in his head and out the other side an explosion that sprayed the room and mingled with the screams, mingled with the minglers now running every which way for their lives. Instead of closing in on the murderer, the guards straightened smartly and went about a quick work of closing off the exits and yelling at every one to get down on the floor and SHUT THE FUCK UP! Oneon could not believe what he was seeing and nor, he could tell, could Sam whose unshakeable face and stature had become rigid and her soft lips taunt as they were pulled wide with her mouth. open. It was like watching a professional bank robbery, at least one from an old television show, since that sort of thing just did not happen anymore.

"Don't. Move." The overbearing head said to them and everyone in the Command room, turning over them as a moon pulling the tides of the earth, everyone felt its vision rake them. Oneon felt a prickle up his spine, the familiar pull of a handle deep inside him, time was slowing down, and with it he could hear his brother's leather coat creaking, that awful creaking he had always hated to hear coming up behind him, and now it seemed to be the only sound in this bubble where nothing moved and everything was about to.

"oh fuck," said Sam. Every. Thing. Exploded.

Oneon ducked behind the desk he had been sitting at and rushed further under neath it, deftly changing his head into a cannon at the same moment. He could feel his ability to use it now, as a muscle that one was worked, the raising of eyebrows or curling of a tongue and now it seemed he could juggle with this power. Whereas before he was eager to use it, now he knew how to use it, but on who? Papers were flying, expensive papers, because all paper was relatively expensive. Glass was shattering, he heard thunks and thuds and people falling, yelling, firing, kicking, and screaming in pain. He heard wet sounds that must be blood, or more sandwiches falling to the ground, you couldn't be sure in all this racket. And he could hear Sam swearing and shouting at the top of her lungs, the Australian accent lost in the screeching of words.

"Throw down your fucking guns, stop fucking shooting you stupid shits, god dammit." And so forth and Oneon suddenly wondered where his brother was, because he was no longer behind him. A man, the one Sam had called Jenkins, appeared ~~SA~~ before him, aiming a pistol straight at him and wearing a scared apologetic look, a mortal look, a desperate one, of unknown loyalty or intent.

"Don't-" he started to say and then his face engulfed in white light, no, a cyan light, a white light tinged by blue, like the sun glaring on an ocean. A beautiful metaphor, a beautiful image, for a terrifying and terrible act. Oneon had unleashed his power, that feeling he had been pulling into himself by that invisible handle, out through the stump of his arm. He- It rushed out of his body, yanking at every nerve in a cascade throughout his body, coalescing into his forearm and firing out in a thumping blast that sizzled like the sound of a fussed firework magnified.



Oneon was mortified, he did not dare to leave his position but could only watch in morbid curiosity at the gaping, cartarized wound that hissed at the stump of Jenkins neck where it met the shoulder. He could not see it but his imagination did plenty of work. The man's legs were splayed out towards him with what was left of his head, or at least what was holding it on, behind the bent knees and feet pointing aimlessly. He didn't jerk or wiggle, just lie there accusing, horrible, dead. Visions of the gypsy he had accidentally killed rose in his mind, blotting out the sounds of battle and Sam's incessant swearing and his wondering where Bourne was.

He had killed that man accidentally, hadn't he? They attacked him, them, and he had to do something. He had wanted to prove that he could take care of himself, but that wasn't quite right either. He hadn't cared at all, he just wanted to put himself in a circumstance of his choosing and find out what happened, whether he died or not. He didn't care because he hadn't planned to come down from that building, at least via the stairs and quite especially not with that handsome, pleasant thing known as his older brother. If his intention was to put himself in harm's way, when was it his intention to kill those men if they hadn't killed him. He had known, in some way, in that way that we all can sense danger if we listen closely to our instincts, that the gypsies or immigrants or whoever they were, that they were poor and desperate, possibly on drugs or alcohol or even just propaganda, and that they would try to harm them. If He never expected his brother to be hurt, nothing seemed to hurt him at all, but he did expect someone to be hurt. He was shaking, his cannon had spun in reverse to close into a fist, and he clenched it hard, hearing the things inside, things he could only imagine like the man's head and neck, things that were invisible but he imagined the gears bending and the artificial synapses firing, and he wanted to squeeze the hand out of existence, he wanted to pull himself out of existence with it. Crumbs fell from his cheeks now streaked with tributaries of mental tribulation, of hydro tributes to his hydraulic death dealing, whatever the fuck it was that had replaced his weak hand with someone everyone wanted immensely and with the only purpose of harm. He had killed a man, snuffed out of a life, and ...

Bourne crouched down swiftly just as his little brother retched up the sandwich, hardly digested, not really digested at all. It looked like chewed food was all but then bile spilled over it as Oneon continued paying a physical price for the physical dead he had done to someone's spirit, forcing it out of his body, forcing it out of this room and this life, and in some way he envied it for knowing things that he did not, that he had been too weak to find out. "I'm sorry so sorry, I didn't mean to..." he was mumbling and retching and absolutely pitiful and could not have heard the blessed silence, at least silence in the comparison of the sounds before. He didn't want to bring the man back but he didn't even know if he had meant him any harm whereas he knew he had meant the man harm. It was no accident.

How many tears does a boy have? How many tears can anyone shed before the body runs dry? It seems sometimes that the well is endless, only as deep as the sorrow one has, there can always be water found to produce more tears. Maybe we absorb it from the air, maybe we burn and boil our plasma inside for it, or maybe we can just never cry enough to satisfy the source, to pay for a deed or match a price, a high-water mark so to speak. Oneon felt comforted by the water from his soul's windows, as if it was raining inside and outside he curled up into the warmth of the deluge.



12/24

ARMOR

(1a)

"Come on, little brother," Bourne spoke softly, tugging at Oneon's sweat-shirt, stained by vomit and wet with tears. E was there, quickly dragging the body from sight, and Sam was speaking.

"I need my fucking armor, I ~~had~~ ~~no~~ that shit better work too."

"Yes sir, and some from these mutinous ones for the boys too?"

"Yes," she paused, breathed deeply, and sighed., surveying the room with sadness ... or disappointment. "I don't know what happened," she said to a few remaining men, two guards and apparently an intern. "But I need to know if I can trust you or if you-"

Laughter. A deep, baritone laugh that emanated from the video screen, from a healthy, mature chest. The voice is sometimes lost in laughter, it cannot be heard, the laugh itself is a new voice that sometimes can be heard in parallel with the normal one. This laugh sounded unhinged, maniacal yet completely controlled, and that made it even more unsettling. "You don't own anyone, Sammy my girl. I'm coming down there to get those boys and kill you so sit tight."

As he spoke, Sam spoke rapidly to E about shutting off the communications but he shook his head as he was tugging what looked like a stretchy mesh with shiny oval discs off of one dead guard. "I already tried, he has it locked open."

"Old fashioned methods then?"

"Appears so, sir."

"And your dear mom, little ones, I'm afraid she's dead too. She may be dead already for all the time you've wasted. You have what's mine and one of you-" the screen shattered, spliced in two by Sam's blade which shivered a fluorescent orange flame, a blowtorch shaped into a sword. She swung again, deftly without any fullstop, a liquid movement of grace like that of a dancer, she cut into various computer systems near the screen and ended with a part of the wall from which a burst of sparks exploded and the room went dark, buzzing lamps clicking off as insects falling silent in the presence of predators. "And that's the juice," she said, brushing a few stray hairs from her eyes with one hand by the light of her sword, fading back to a whitish gray in the other.

"What did he mean about our mother?" Bourne demanded, propping up his brother on a desk. Sam ignored him and talked to the defenseless guard survivors who had given up the fight. They nodded, one patted her back, and she sighed again, apologizing before zipping their wrists together with cord behind their backs.

E had come over with the strange mesh shirts, that looked like mosquito webbing with enamel ovals, colorful bits, where the forearms, biceps, shoulders would be as well as larger ones, two on either side of the stomach and one in the center of the chest. "Put these on, over your clothes is fine. I'll go get some leggings as well."

Bourne did so and helped Oneon into his. The "I wish they had blue," Oneon said with a small, desperate smile. Bourne looked at him, gazing into his face.

"I think that William is going to do something to mom."

"I don't care."

"Dammit little brother, why are you being a worse ass than usual?"

"Why did you kiss her, Bourne? Of all the girls you kiss and-"

"Pardon, no time for personal discussions. Put these one over your pants and cinch them up. I think it's obvious where the discs should be covering." E had returned with more of this so-called armor which they dutifully put on, Oneon glaring at Bourne, and Bourne pushing his brows together in an expression that could be described in any number of feelings.



"E, I assume I can trust you fully."

"Quite, sir. I assure you that I'm fully independent and really, you know I have no skill with guile."

"Yes, you're a shitty liar so I'll take that. It's time to move, I don't think we'll have long before more are here."

"Unfortunately they already are, sir. They're fixing their defenses and preparing to lay siege to this room. After your demonstration of prowess--"

"Save the pillow talk, doors locked?"

"Yes."

"Okay, can we take the lift to the lobby?"

"William has secured the lift to his own purposes and I doubt the front entrance is clear for us to waltz out."

"Where did that boy's bike get put?"

"The garage just below the mezzanine. Do you want it?"

"I did, but there's no way we can get to it. Unless we can fight our way in there ... or cause a distraction elsewhere."

"Negative, sir, there are enough Kops in this building to handle any diversion with a large force. They don't need to stick together ... as we do."

"Wait, are there any Hieristics active?"

"Six, sir, I trained them myself."

"That's not enough, can we remote them? I mean, without arousing suspicion?"

E gave her an amused, flat look.

"I take it, yes. Okay, so have them patrol outward and get one to take the cycle out to the sewer entrance at the Sixth and Jackson bridge."

"They cannot ride, you know--"

"Carry, E, carry. Is one enough?"

"I'll send two. We're going through the Hydroponics then?"

"It's the only way."

"It's no way if we can't get to it."

The floor shook and the furniture swayed, the entire building appeared to have been jumbled slightly and sounds of thunder piled on after a brief moment. They heard clumps against the walls of the room, possibly tripped up Kops who had falling into the walls. An alarm was going now and a flashing red light in the room was bathing everything in strobe blood.

"What was--" Oneon started to say. He had been quiet with his ruminations and Bourne was looking not at him, but at the ground, even though he still stood right next to him.

"SHH!" Sam smacked him upside the back of his head and he left out a muffled grunt of indignant surprise, he turned his glare on her but she gave him no notice. "We move now or we're dead now."

She strode swiftly over to a seemingly arbitrary point in the room, removed a picture of a sailboat with a swipe of the hand, and deftly entered some numbers into the keypad which had been revealing. The wall slide aside revealing a passage that lit up dimly with some kind of glow strips.

"General privilege," she said by way of explanation, waving them in.

E produced some level of surprise that disappeared as quickly as they did into the secret wall and Sam closed it behind them. "I expect that won't delay them long, but I doubt anyone remembers this offhand. So, there's a connection here to the service stairway; we're going down." She chuckled.



The narrow corridor led to a simple ladder that extended down through a hatch in the floor.

"Not handicap accessible, but we've never had a general in a wheelchair," Sam snickered, raising the latch of the hatch and peaking into the tiny room below. It was a kind of janitor's closet with brooms, mops, cleaning supplies, and other miscellaneous things such as the unused and broken chairs piled up in the middle. "Crap, that's going to make some noise when I push them over."

"Let me go," Oneon piped up from his gloomy silence.

"Oneon, no-" Bourne was interrupted by his little brother shoving past him and Sam, who raised an eyebrow, and watched as Oneon agilely slipped down. He pushed the chairs slowly aside, their scraping against the carpet sounding unusually loud, and motioned for the ladder to come down. It was cramped and Oneon was reminded of the elevator with those big thugs who had ruined his life and taken him and ... Nicky. He groaned inwardly.

E put his ear up to the door, turned and nodded briefly. Somewhere above them they heard a crash and a stampede of feet bursting into the room they had only just left and spreading out in search of them. Sam did not ruffle but gave E a terse nod in response and whispered, "Stay close, there's no luxury of directions." And the door was opened and they ran out into a large stairwell of those flashing red lights, the piercing, foghorn-like alarm continued to ring out balefully. There was no one in the stairway and Oneon thought he heard Sam comment on laziness, he assumed it was that of the Kops who had been surrounding them.

The walls were raw stone blocks here, no drywalls or wood paneling or even paint to cover up the grayness, the sense of solid industrial underpinnings. This was probably one of the first buildings the Builders had erected when founding Core City after the Collapse. The stones here were getting close to their first centennial and Oneon was surprised at how good they looked. They had obviously been dedicated to their craft and the future of this God-forsaken race of living things that he reluctantly found himself a part of. Well, it was only reluctant, because it wasn't going any way he had ever dreamed or hoped and maybe he was beginning to lose those childhood dreams completely. He pondered at the conviction of such a group of people amidst all the chaos of human civilization folding in on itself, all the same evils now present in the sanctuary they had built to save their race. He supposed that saving precious life also meant saving the trappings that went along with it and that meant a lot of greed and laziness.

They were running down stairs and his legs were tired and shaky. He needed energy, he needed to eat something, to rest and lie down and dream again, to forget the tribulations of today and come back to the hope of tomorrow. Hope and fear are two sides of the same token and he had flipped. He was scared that he might die or, worse, be horribly injured. If they captured him, what would they do to his arm? What would happen to his brother? What HAD happened to his mother? He had said he hadn't cared, but that wasn't true, and this thought surprised him. He had truly thought he didn't care anymore, but if he did care ...

Sam led them through some door, he didn't know what the level they were on. On through another hallway, alien signs that looked like depictions of jellyfish were pinned to other doors, different colors, and people in casual clothing stared at them, sweaty, intense, rushing that they were. He noticed some were grabbing phones and others seemed to be reaching for weapons but mostly they just sat or stood and stared with surprise. Although they couldn't hear it, communication via radio was occurring and the troops would soon be redirected to where they now were, possibly surrounded, and definitely hurt. At intervals there were secured doors with keypads next to them which either E or Sam stopped briefly to type in before the door opened. At one such door, the keypad flashed red and the door did not open.



"Cut the door,s sir?"

"My blade's dry, we'll have to shoot it open."

Bourne stepped forward and with a loud, groaning crunch he smashed the lower hinge and then the upper one, finalizing with a popping hit to the center which sent it ctoppling inward.

"Nice, I should've paid attention to that when we were fighting," Sam said stepping through the opened door and gripping Bourne briefly on the shoulder. Oneon seethed at the look of pride on his brother's face and a slight flush of excitement. Still the golden boy, always the best son, the first son, mother's pride and joy and the dictator of Oneon's exitense. He passed the usual glare, now a reflex, as he passed his brother. Bourne usually took this without showing anything, sometimes he ~~was~~ would make some pretentious statement about behaving or maturity, but this time he frowned back and shook his head. He had put on his sunglasses and Oneon could not see his eyes. Why did he wear those things now?

"Last door, Bourne would you care to-" Sam started but the doors, this one a pair of sliding ones, massive vault-liked ones, opened. A riot officer faced them alone. Sam tensed as did Bourne and E but E told them to stop immediately.

"I took the liberty of having a ~~Herb~~- Hierestic meet us here, sir." He nodded at the figure who nodded back and stepped aside. As they went around it passed quietly in the other direction and Oneon could hear the hiss and chunking sounds of hydraulics and he understood that undearneath the standrd-appearing riot geer, this was some kind of robot. There weren't many riots in Core City and he hadn't ever witnessed one in person, but the videos they had all seen on the news or in school had given him the knowledge of their outfits, the masks to protect their faces now taking on a new meaning as to also cover their identity, the fact that they were robots. The government had always been careful to imply robotic humanoids were beyond the reach of their technology, because people tended to fear something of that nature, or rather not of nature at all, but a human creation. It's funny that we can be scared of what we create moreson than what is already there or even, of ourselves. Oneone wondered about the old concept of God and if he feared his creations or if he had contemporaries that did.

Betyond the vault door was an anteroom ~~the~~ with the backwall open and it was up above a dark field of ... hanging plants? They looked like jellyfish swimming in slow motion, in the air. There was a hum around them of machines but he supposed out there the sounds would be different. The air was muggy and hot and at first his skin met it with eagerness after the staleness of the Center's offices. The overlooking anteroom had several screens, terminals, and computers but none of them were occupied. E gave a dry wink to Sam who smiled, "You're the best man I know, how are you still single?"

He shurugged. "I'm not going to tanswer that, sir. It just wouldn't be funny

She chuckled as he closed the door and they walked briskly down the metal, scaffolding-like steps down into the Hydroponics Garden. Getting away from the observation room which happened to be the only source of white light, Oneon saw that everything was bathed in a reddish purple, the color of beats. It was quite down here, the floor was wet, and the ceilings were not that high. He could see all sorts of tubes and wires above and around these ghostly plants in plastic jars. It was a zoo of alien creatures, a farm of staple foods that the city consumed. These were all scientifiscally engineered away from what they had been into more efficient forms that could ~~be~~ grown underground. He should know more but he hadn't really paid attention in class.



The classroom was the modern church and science the new religion. He had sometimes thought of them as the Children of Science for now it was more blasphemous to believe in God, maybe not to the point of the old inquisitions but it would destroy your social standing. People would not take you seriously if anything was based on faith, everything required an experiment and some long-winded explanation to back it up. He thought they spent more time proving than living and in their living that they spent more time "relaxing". The curse of better convenience had left the public apathetic and unwilling to do more than survive, but what else could be done?

"Alright, we've got some moments of peace, let's go over a few things," Sam broke into his thoughts and brought him back to the damp, dark present. "They've figured out where we've gotten into by now, for sure, but now where we'll go from here. There are many exits to the various sanal and sewer passages from the gardens, because they spread out under a fair amount of the city. They'll be trying to cover as many exits as they can, but E can locate us one with the least probability of bad guys. And these aren't bad guys, really, they're my fucking co-workers gone, I don't know, nuts. Maybe some of them aren't bad at all, but I can't take that chance just yet. There will likely be some fighting and I know you two are capable but green. I want you two to stay back as much as possible and fire defensively, not aggressively. I will tell you when to move and you will listen to me."

"Sir?"

"Or E, of course."

"Sir, they are unarmed."

"Ha, well, one of them is anyway, but what an arm it is." She patted Bourne and looked at Oneon. "I know this isn't easy for you, but you are the only one of you two that can fire. I want you two to stay close to each other, he can keep them at bay up close and you can drive them off at a distance."

Great, working together had never been a strong suit of the brothers and neither were particularly happy about the setup, but it was logical, safe, and Oneon did not intend to obey the command at all. Bourne and Sam could spot this easily in his face and exchanged a look. "Well, do your best to keep him out of trouble," Sam told Bourne. Oneon shut his eyes briefly and clenched his teeth in frustration.

"Now that armor, assuming it's working, is some top shit that will activate when your body goes into flight or fight response. In order for it to detect that, you've got to connect it first. Put your palm on one of those avals wait for it to warm it and then squeeze."

Oneon gasped and Bourne grimaced; they felt needles prick their body at all the points where the ovals were situated over, and now the shirt felt tighter. "It'll also try to mend basic injuries for you and that tightness won't seem so bad in a firefight. It probably feels like you can't breathe, so take some deep breaths and you'll get used to it."

Sam went on explaining the finer points of the Armor and they activated the pants as well. Oneon felt constrained in areas he preferred not to, but his rebelliousness kept him quiet and as did Bourne's pride in doing the right thing. Thankfully there were no needles in the crotch, but they did seem to come awfully close and for a moment, against their wills, both brothers walked slightly like cowboys who had just come from a long ride, wincing with each step and trying valiantly not to let their watering eyes turn into full fledged tears.



"Very good, sirs. Now I heard you previously indicate you would prefer a different color than the standard gray that you assumed. Let me assure you that they will adopt the color of your underlying garments so yours will turn blue and your brother's red and black." - EOneon was wearing a ratty old blue sweatshirt, one of Bourne's old-me-downs and of course Bourne was wearing his favorite red and black leather coat. The--

"Color, ha, let's hope it just keeps you from bleeding out."

Oneon gulped at Sam's comment, never a fan of pain and remembering faintly that tearing, ripping, horribly fleshy sensations of - no, he didn't want to remember but what was a blur before and a vague memory of outer pieces of him on the floor was now intruding on his brain. It had felt as if his hand were stuck in a blender, no, as if someone was grabbing each individual finger and twisting them around until the flesh tore off, as one would do with a piece of foil. He must've turned green. "Is there a green light in here, I thought it was more of a violet," Sam grinned at him. Was she trying to make him feel better? She wasn't very good at small talk.

"I've never been great at making settling people, especially my kids"

"You have a kid?"

"Yeah, a son, wonderfull bugger when he's not acting like a dumbass, that is like his dad. I suppose I can't forgive him since he has all that bloody genetic material from him."

"You're married too?"

"Technically, yes, but physically no. I don't think I've ever been quite married to him. Why kid, are you married or just interested in me?"

He blushed. "No, no, I mean, you're very pretty but--"

"Too old?"

"No, well, I'm only 13."

"What? You're 12," Bourne cut in. "You'll be 13 tomorrow."

"Isn't it tomorrow then?" asked OOneon glaring at his brother.

"Not for at least another hour, my little prince," Sam said.

"It's 10:42. PM, of course, sir."

"Thanks E, so my estimate stands."

Had it been only forty-two minutes since the power went out at their apartment building? So much had happened in there, it was a lifetime ago and OOneon did not know the boy the thugs had captured. Nor the girl. Now he was on an adventure he knew wouldn't soon be over. This time passing quickly would go on for much more time yet and would it still seem so long? If this continued for a day then would it seem a century? He wasn't sure he could bear such a long interval even if it was only in his mind. Did it matter if it wasn't as long to anyone else if he still perceived it so?

"Don't worry, kid, we'll wish you a happy birthday in an hour." Sam said.

"Thanks," Oneon replied but he wasn't really paying attention.

They weaved through the jellyfish plants, sweating in the humid air and feeling blind and alien by the violet light, ultra-violet light ... or some kind of violet light at least. Did these still use artificial sunrays and radiation to grow or was it something else, he didn't know. The wavered slightly and he didn't feel any breeze so he wondered if they were moving, if they were becoming sentient, and knew that they were merely hanging prisoners waiting to be harvested for their flesh as food. HE shuddered, imagining himself up there dangling, ever stuck in that light, that awful purple red, like a fresh bruise spattered with blood, waiting in the purgatory of perceived time stretched out to infinity, an infinite anxiety of a future that would never happen



Did plants react only too slow, their perception of time far too broad for us to understand them. If two beings worked in two zones of time but within the same space there was an impossible gap to cross when communicating and maybe these poor creatures could, at some level, understand their fate and do nothing about it; understand it in such a way that they knew what would happen but not why. What an awful predicament to be in!

Bourne shifted his shoulders uncomfortably, the mesh shirt and pin-prick y ovals sitting and digging and itching. Sam slapped Oneon's hand away from his leg, "Don't scratch. You'll get used to it and you probably don't want a rash. Otherwise ... be my guest."

"Are the gardens going to go on forever? It feels like we've been walking that long."

"Normally I'd tell you to shut it, but you're right - E are we there yet?"

"No, sir, or we would have stopped. OR would you prefer a joke in responses?"

"I can't tell if you're messing with me, but I like it. Why is the only person around here with a sense of humor not even a person at all."

Oneon didn't feel like laughing, he didn't know why Sam would want to. She had instantly become an outcast because of him and yet continued as if she were still in charge, of something. She kept with a cool determination that he envied but could not emulate. He felt lost and following someone else who had lost; he was literally a loser, something the kids at school had ingrained into him anyway. Bourne never said superficial derogatory remarks, but he put him down in other ways. He supposed he'd always been confused and now was as good a time as any to be, he finally had a tangible reason, something he could hold up to the world in his soul and say: See, this is why I feel fucked up!

He wanted to talk to Bourne, but he wasn't saying anything, neither of them were saying anything to each other and Bourne wasn't saying anything to anybody. He had gone completely silent and Oneon thought that Sam must be able to detect the tension in the air but she had no way of dispelling it, or knowing how to at least, why didn't she just try? Why did he have to do it?

"Why are you so quiet?" He said to Bourne.

"Do you care - about anything?"

"Maybe," Oneon answered sullenly, wishing he hadn't said anything.

"I'm worried about mom ... and, if you must know, NIKcy."

"You're not worried about us?"

"At least I know where we are, I don't know where they are and what's happening to them."

"Mom is out helping people ... or some guy and your girlfriend is home practicing to kiss you."

"She's not my girlfriend."

"I know mom's not your girlfriend."

"Geez, you're being an idiot."

Oneon was but he couldn't stop himself, he felt very low and wanted to say stupid things and be as low as he felt. "Well, I'm not a backstabber."

"What are you talking about? She's not your girlfriend? Why? Do you like her? No, obviously you like her, why didn't you just ask her out?"

"OBVIOUSLY she likes you, everyone likes you."

"Maybe if you weren't a jerk like this-"

"Maybe if you didn't treat me like shit!"

"Are you kidding? I'm the only reason you don't get the shit kicked out of you at school!"

"I know, that's what I'm talking about! You treat me like a child!"

"You ARE a child, especially like this!"

Sam shushed them loudly, "Save the therapy for later, I can't hear anything with you two laying into each other."



"I can, sir."

"Not helping, E."

"Sorry, sir."

Sam sighed. "I don't need you two falling apart right now. You're not event cadets, but you're two of the few people I can count on not to shoot me in the fucking face on site, and I don't even know why that is."

"Shouldn't we be figuring that out?" Bourne asked?

"Yes, ~~we~~ SHOULD, would you like to do that here?"

"How?"

"No how, not here. We're going to a safe house beyond the city limits."

"In the farming ditsrict?"

"No, in the western wilds."

"What?! We'll be killed."

"We'll be fine, do you fancy your chances here ~~are~~ any better?"

"William just wants you dead, not us?"

"You really believe that? I don't and I won't take that chance."

"You mean yo won't take the cahnce of being completely defenseless without u s as your body guards?" Bourne was flushed, but he did not quail at Sam's stern look which did not soften as she spoke.

"~~Never~~ Nerve, kid, you got that for sure but the last thing I need is to babysit ~~too~~ emotionally fucked up teenagers."

"We can take care of ourselves, I can take care of us."

"Yeah, sure, I can see your brother is eager for that ~~he~~ happen."

Oneon would prefer Sam led to anyone else, he couldn't imagine following his brother willingly anywhere. In fact, he would still go with Sam even if mom were at home and Bourne were beckoning him to return. He wasn't even sure abou t his feelings for Nicky. Everything was so turned up side down, one moment he was heartbroken and the next he's handbroken with danger every where, the city he hated, the metropolis of head strones and dead things had come alive to kil him. And Bourne wanted him to go back to it. "I'm going with Sam."

"Like hell you are, I can't expect you to understand right now, brother, but I'm thinking of your best interests. ~~We/teYou/te~~ don't know the danger you're getting into."

"Neither did the guy I shot in the face. I don't even remember his name now, but I can't get the face out of ~~my~~ head and I blew the name off with the face."

"That couldn't be helped, I should have gotten there first."

"So what, so ~~w~~ you could shoot him? Punch him to death with your fancy fucking arm? Well, I have one ~~too~~ now and I used it to shoot him. What does it matter who did it to him? He's dead and I'm in danger. So what. I'm still goin with Sam."

"I can't protect you if you go with her."

"I have NEVER wanted your protection, you just never leave me alone."

"If I left you alone, what would happen? You'd try running away again."

"Yeah? So? What have we ~~ever~~ had to come home too? She doesn't care if we're there or not, why should we?"

"Of course she cares, she loves us, she's our mother! And she might be dead too! Did you think of that?"

"I don't know here anymore than I knew that guy who is definitely dead."

"No! That's not true and you know it! Lilee has sacrificied so much to raise us and this is how you treat her? It's not like-"

"Shut the FUCK up, CRIPES!" Sam lost it and E rolled his eyes. "Now, that reminds me, since you brought it up ... Lilee. William absolutely lost his marbles when he heard that name. Any idead how he knows your mom?"



"No, but she knows lots of men." Bourne said.

"Only poor ones like us, she works at a hospital in the poor district and volunteers in clinics around there. She always ends up with bums." Oneon added

Bourne sighed, "He's not wrong. I don't understand."

"As much as I loath that self<sup>9</sup>important prick, he's no hobo," Sam shook her head. "And I guess he must have known her some time ago, maybe when you were too young to remember."

"Or he got the name mixed up, sir."

"Maybe, as you say we only get a single registered name. There are ways around that though, like alternate spellings."

"Her name is a little funny, not ending in a 'y'." Oneon volunteered.

"Oh? That's curious, but I've never heard the name before and obviously William doesn't hear it often or he wouldn't have had that reaction." I wish I had access to the database."

"Perhaps I can assist with that when you head to the safe house, sir."

"True, I guess you can't ride with ~~o~~ us on that bike. It barely fits three as it is and I don't think these two can be out of sight without running off ... or killing one another. Let's not give our enemy that advantage."

"Of killing them, sir?"

"No of them being dead and me having to drag their corpses."

"Vewry funny," Bourne glowered at her. "I don't see how you think we can trust you either."

"You're not quite dead, are you?"

"We're not safe ~~h~~ either."

"There's a slight edifference you may be forgetting."

"If you give me any indication of harm, I'm taking my brother away whether he wants to go or not."

"Hey," Oneon objected but Sam finished the thought, "Oh ho, big brother weares the britches. IF you weren't so young I'd consider drafting you."

Bourne blushes suddenly, the scarlet to match his scarf. "You're not in a position to help anyone do that right now," he mumbled.

True enough, but I don't stay so low indefinitely and I have my eye on you," She turned away, seeming to end the conversation. Oneon was nonplussed and did not want to hear more about his brother receiving accolades. Wasn't he the one with the special arm, wasn't eh the one that everyone wanted? Why was his brother still the one receiveing this?

"How did someone like you become general anyway, I've never seen you on TV." Oneon grumbled at her back.

"A person like me? I assume you don't mean a woman, but that is unusual and as a matter of fact they promoted me for that very reason. I am a political pawn otherwise I'd remain lieutenant indefinetly."

Oneon harumphed and Bourne tried to quiete him which only incensed him more. "And besides," Sam added. "I am on television. Just look for the tall bitch at the back of crime scenes yelling at people. I'm the one that typically ends uncomfortable press coverage with uncomfortable insults to their camera men ... nand no small amount of threats."

"Zero tolerance for media?"

"That's me," Sam nodded at Bourne.

Dman him, ~~scoring~~ more points in the backlash of her response to him. Oneon was no longer exhausted, he actually felt quite refreshed by this casual pace, but his mind just used that fuel to set itself on fire. And again it went into a loop of anger and despair. He had gotten away from home only to be constantl trapped by his brother and those who would act as his brother. HE felt as if h e would never be free and nobody wanted who he was but they waouldn't let him go either. It was some frustrating!



"I am blocked from Command, but I know we are near the exit and a Heuristic is already there with the bike, sir."

"Wall coming up, I feel it too. I think you'd be blocked by the interference of all this stone and processing down here anyway. I'll be happy to get out of this endless bloody cavern, it makes me feel nauseous."

Low roof, fake jellyfish, and pillars at regular intervals gave the cavernous gardens a sense of endlessness. Sam was used to normal sunlight, preferred it to being in an office under those hateful fluorescents, but it was also the combinations of light and chemicals in the air which probably contributed to the feelings of sickness. There was a dreamlike quality of the place, like one of those nightmares of an area where there are no walls and you are only going in circles even though it is not that large. When you can't see very far, and everything is bathed in the same uniform light it is easy to imagine that you are not getting anywhere with each footstep, that you are on some hellish hamster wheel shaped like a room with a smooth, damp stone floor and populated by silent aliens that could not step into your time but would watch you from it. Oneon pondered the difference between this reality and any dream and if it weren't for the lucid, routine arguments between him and his brother he might have concluded that he was asleep. Also, the pinching feelings inside him that gave him a handle to this new power were not anything he had ever experienced in a dream. He did dream of dying often though and wondered if he died now, if it were currently just the lead up to some new dream. That did not give him comfort, because it would mean he would wake up in their dingy apartment and he would hear Bourne and Nicky kissing outside his room and it would be worse than the pain of dying. He had already been through that.

The wall with the door was indicative of everything else practical and pragmatic and very boring about Core City. It might have been made out of cinder blocks stacked by a computer for all its gray precision and the only chaos exhibited upon it was the mossy substance, probably just moss that had flourished mutatively under the weird atmosphere off the gardens, which coated it in fuzzy patches. The wall was a perfect thing diseased. It was homogenous and no such thing can ever remain homogenous, because there is a tide to everything, a give and take, and anything perfectly smooth is destined to rot or become patchy and covered with moss. Oneon looked down at this new hand and it was perfectly metal, smooth, and the cracks were only fine lines. He had never heard of anything so technically perfect and that must be why they wanted him so badly. It was for this horribly alien thing, smooth and unaffected by natural laws, that he had taken for granted all this time as his arm and now his idea of an arm lived as a ghost in an apartment the body had not died in. A transplanted spirit, sending it to the suburbs.

The door was one-way and had a couple of massive latches on it which meant it was supposed to be locked from this side and they could not keep it closed. Besides anything else, cameras or what have you, that would also pinpoint exactly where they had left and if there were any sensors in the door, they would not be able to fake them as being closed.

"Hold it," Bourne said as E, barrel chested and flexing his shoulders, had approached the spinlock at the edge of the doorframe. He looked questioningly at this teenager in sunglasses and a scarf. We must look ridiculous to him, thought Oneon. E was, after all, impeccably dressed in a suit, and even the smudges of battle had not taken any edge off his stylish, calm demeanor. He wore the damaged suit as if it were pristine and it gave off that impression despite the evidence yelling in the onlookers face.



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(2a)

Bourne placed his right hand on the door and Oneon assumed he was closing his eyes as he bent his head forward in a gesture of concentration. He thought he heard a buzzing coming from his brother's arm, but when he tried to further identify the sound it may not have been there at all. It was like those thissing noises which start in one's ear but are actually in the mind where the drum doesn't need to be played in order for a new instrument to be heard. Oneon could not be sure if he was hearing his brother's arm or if it was being played in his head; only to him. He did not want to ask, he did not want a special connection to his brother. Perhaps their arms had some link to one another and that thought terrified him.

"There's no sensor on this door," he said finally. "It hasn't been used in ages, maybe even forgotten about because I almost think it's never been opened at all. However, that means it might make a LOT of noise when it does."

E murmured a word of astonishment but Sam took it in stride, "the fuck are we waiting for then?" E nodded and she told them to put on their helmets, as he turned the spinlock with even precision, it turned as if it was well greased but it groaned heavily. They were stabbing the door to death and it was crying out, no, they were giving it CPR and bringing it to life and it had been peacefully dead for so long it did not know how to deal with all of this exposure, all of this life. Oneon felt the door was crying out to him and he would have comforted it if he could have, if it were not an inanimate object and he wasn't just thinking about his own pain and wishing he had been asleep for a long time but no one came to turn his spinlock and bring him back.

It was thick, metal, one of the original doors of the Builders and it swung outward with a wide birth and expertly positioned about a darkened room that smelled wet and dank. Not the dampness of the hydroponics garden, a dampness of nutrients that felt overpowering. This was the kind of muggy wetness that drags one down, that covers things to rot and rust and makes you forget about them. It isn't the smell of death, it is the smell of infinite rotting and mildew and the possibility of all those sticky moments when things work out perfectly awful. It was definitely the restroom level of a poor building.

"We've really come quite a ways," I see, said Sam wrinkling her nose.

"Several districts, but only half a mile as the crow flies, sir."

"I expect we'll find several dead crows that flew here." She moved stealthily out into the room, swinging her arms and eyes about expertly in what was to Oneon pitch blackness. Bourne too stalked out into the room, still in his sunglasses, and mimicked her moves but in the opposite direction. He was obviously trying to impress her but Oneon had to grudgingly admit that he was doing a good job. She thought so (seemed) too, giving him a slight motion of her head and pointing at various spots, delegating. E moved of his own accord without any stoop whatsoever, but a tall grace despite his large barrel chest and long legs. Only Oneon stumbled out, over a broken glass or something which clinked so loudly he blushed in embarrassment and everyone turned to see it. He imagined they could see him perfectly, as they were moving as if they could see perfectly. Then he realized, however, it wasn't so dark and saw the soda bottle he had sent rolling across a trash-strewn floor as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He saw Bourne watching him, but the others had turned away and in this blackness he felt it was a menacing look, the watchful eye of a zookeeper on a supposedly tamed beast.

"How can you see where you're going?" Oneon asked E, whom he felt was the most approachable and was waiting at the base of a stairway that Bourne and Sam had just gone up and out of sight.

"I've been in dozens of buildings with the same plan, young sir."

"Are they programmed into your robot memory?"

E turned his head sharply towards him and Oneon's heart leapt slightly.

"I am most certainly NOT a robot, I assure you." The lack of a "sir" at the end of this made Oneon feel uneasy, that he had touched on something personal and he was too embarrassed to inquire further.



If not a robot then what was he? His unshakeable, funflappable personality spoke of a coldness one only assumes from machines. However, it was true that humanoid robots and even cyborgs were technically illegal. People feared them not only out of their possibility but the idea that they would detract from what little the world had left for them to plunder. Maybe that wasn't it exactly, but even Riot Bots did not exist in the public eye. Everyone had an inkling that they were out there, but they mingled with the regular riot Kops and it was difficult to tell, impossible really. Not only all that, but the technology for a virtual brain was beyond that of even the most brilliant of Core City's scientists and William was at the top of that. It was a scary prospect that the man who had personally erupted in front of him and shot the president mayor was also the most intelligent person in the metropolis.

The President Mayor was dead, shot by the premiere researcher and defense specialist who was being honored by him and the rest of the city. Their tax dollars had funded a dinner in which one assassinated the other in a moment of explosive anger. He hadn't really thought about it all until now, the other man's death, the man he had killed whose name even now escaped him, his death had covered up that memory of the most prominent figure in the city being destroyed before their eyes. Sam hadn't mentioned it either, had she forgot as well or was pointedly ignoring it. There wasn't any reason to give that any more importance than the fact that they were being hunted to the end of their lives and possibly every Kop in the city would be out looking for them and prepared to fire on sight.

Oneon had never seen Kops use weapons besides simple clubs for beating back small mobs, disbanding bar fights, and hustling the occasional immigrant. It had been a peaceful time for the city for the duration of his life. His life which would be a year older tomorrow and the city went from peacefulness to pieces. Motor chases in the streets, mayors killed in plain view, and Kops gunned down by their contemporaries. How could one think amongst this pure insanity and what had happened to it all that it could go so far so fast?

He then heard the dull roar of an old, familiar engine come to life and he knew they had located the bike. "Time to go, sir." E patted him on the upperback in a paternal gesture Oneon had little experience with. It felt good and right and something he had wished for but not known he had. He'd been desiring all those things that his brother seemed to possess for so long that he didn't know to want the things neither of them had. This was something Bourne still had not gotten and he gloated momentarily over that black fact.

Sam met them halfway up the stairs, her armor had expanded over her body so that she appeared shinier, porcelain and ready for action. Her face was set and grim and her hair even appeared to wave in readiness. The armor only activates when the body was in danger, she had said, and Oneon tensed in anticipation. As he did so he felt plates expanding over his clothes, crawling over the surface of his body as a light but firm touch, a massage and a tightening as a shell of flexible protection enveloped him. It provided no heat and the adrenaline he unleashed chilled him further, reaching through the armor to the autumn air, his breaths sucking in the putrid smell of the pit of a basement they had been in.

"I suppose I don't need to tell you to get ready, but they are up there looking for us and with the bike started it won't be long before they've found their target."

"Can we outrun them?"

Sam hesitated only slightly, "No, not these."

"These?"

"Quick Gliders... aircraft."



"What? I've never heard of-"

"They're pulling out all the stops to get us. These are experimental and thankfully only a couple worthy of flight. We'll have to bring them down if we want to get out of here without being followed." They were on the first floor in a dusty hallway with graffiti and broken doors. This was one of the abandoned buildings. The Builders brought up the city in an anticipation of more people or perhaps they had no idea how many there would be or when to stop. Making the city had given everyone something to do and had given them purpose, hope, and the possibility of a stronghold to pin the survival of our specifics to. The most occupied buildings were the closest to Central which dispensed food, power, and government which included security and the best medical attention. Thus all entertainment of the best pedigree clung to the area as well and as one moved further out into the city it just degraded into pure housing and finally the empty husks of potential that had never known tenants. It's true that some had been abandoned after use as well, as people found it more comforting to be near others at the expense of personal space and also because the claustrophobia of an oasis in a sea of the apocalyptic unknown was too much for many to bear and they wandered out into the outside world, mostly never to return. Thus some of the fortifications were formed of these empty structures which, unfortunately for security, had also proved tricky places to keep clear of illegal immigrants and gypsies, wanderers, bandits, criminals and the list went on and on. The government used the possibility of these threats, which all threats were possibilities only, to garner public support for its increasingly militaristic inventions in the name of peace and safety and defense against whatever machinations the outside had begun constructing elsewhere beyond the pervue of their sentries, spies, and scouts.

¶/¶ "There's something else you should know too," Sam went on and laid her hand on Oneon's shoulder. Rather than paternal this felt like a harbinger and he shrank back from it slightly, peering at her in anxiety. "We're close to the sector where your mom works, as Bourne told me and..."

"She's dead?" Oneon said it flatly.

"No, well we can't tell. The place is a mass of rubble ... it's been utterly demolished and by what I could not tell you."

He felt cold and he wondered if it was a shock, if remorse would hit him and regret for all the times he could have spent with his mom and chose not to. Then again there were plenty more of those from her and it had been years since she had tried being there for him, trying to get to know him. He swore that she had begun eyeing him almost accusingly. It's true he was doing poorly in school and she had to attend several conferences to discuss what to do about his behavioral issues, but it was a chicken and egg situation. At some point in what seemed distant past, he remembered a mother that doted on him incessantly to the point that he felt choked, unable to breathe or be anything except her little kiddie pet that she toted around as a doll. Maybe that was her way of loving him, but then she gave Bourne the lion's share of praise while he got mere attention. Mountains of it and while she prided herself in Bourne's accomplishments, she revelled in Oneon's presence. It made no sense at all and then one day it quite entirely. When was that? Bourne continued accomplishing without reaping any of her compliments or encouragement and Oneon stopped trying when no one was standing over him, helping him pull all the strings on his life. He was relieved, actually, that she was no longer invading his every waking moment and decision, but she left a hole, a space she had occupied, that he did not think would be so hard to fill.



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"Are you okay?" they had stopped out on the front steps of the building. It was very dark, cold, and quiet except for the idling of the bike's engine and Oneon's heart thumping in his ears. The sky opened up beyond the cracks of streets between the buildings, streets that were narrow because they didn't require space for space-hogging cars, and so the view of above was narrow too. Starry blackness through cracks, fine lines like those on his hand, a universe inside both. He hadn't realized that he had stopped and nothing else had, everything had kept going, time was returning to normal at least.

"Fine," he said shortly and speeding up to walk towards Bourne who sat at the front of the bike, he's legs one up on it and the other a kickstand holding it upright. He had a tight look on his face, his brain must also be working furiously and he too thought about his mother and what ~~hit~~ it meant for her to be gone. Not just gone, but taken from them. And she who had kept herself away, taken herself from them already, was now a pawn in a game they could not imagine and they couldn't be sure if they thought of her as a mere pawn or if they still loved her as a mother. Isn't it true that you can love someone deeply but not like them at all, and only like their memory but love whatever current incarnation they are in? So it seems they loved her and their screwed up eyes and tight faces were emotions flexing in their heads, muscles without tendons, contracting their expressions into hateful sorrow, regrettable anger and sadness that fell outside the bounds of simple compassion.

Behind Bourne, who was facing away from this, he saw rubble extending into the blackness and a part of the city had opened up into several blocks of nothingness, not even people, no gawkers, except for a handful of looters here and there and squads of what he assumed were Kops attempting to restore order amongst those. He felt his peripheral vision touched and he looked up to see what appeared as giant boomerangs careening swiftly through the air above the ruins and weaving between buildings. Their short wingspan and sharply angular shape made them appear weaponlike as if tossed by some giant who hid somewhere behind the remaining skyscrapers, fishing with missiles. Spotlights underneath them lit circular patches of ground and they moved with such speed that Oneon felt scared for them to crash not just see them, but he knew it was them they were looking for and their crashing would actually be a boon.

Two riot officers, which must be Hieristics, stood near to the bike with their hands moving idly about, in some routine to emulate human boredom and fidgeting. They wore helmets with full face guards that prevented any visual of the face beneath, a one-way mirror that, in this case, might as well have been two way. Oneon had no idea how they saw or what they saw or if they saw at all or rather felt their away around by some other means, some other ~~data~~, but besides knowing that they were not human they appeared completely human. They acted so human that he felt a prickel on his skin of being in the presence of a complete alien. They were too perfect and knowing that they weren't real made their gestures and humanness ugly and insincere and he wanted to smash them suddenly. He was surprised at his own venom towards these things which had no ill will, no will of their own, and maybe that's why he hated them. They were the pure puppets, the manifestation of what he had himself always been treated as but they didn't care whether they had no choice or not. And maybe he just wanted to lash out at someone in vengeance over his mother's death, because who else would? Bourne was a goody goody and would never stoop to revenge. He probably felt it was beneath him, but Oneon felt it was a right that must be utilized and he wanted to be the one to take up that gauntlet and that flag and wave it. He wanted to make William pay for his mother's death, pay for the life that, if he was honest, he would not even miss.



Oneon noticed he did not see any bodies in the rubble, no parts or ~~the~~ blood painting the broken stones, cement, and twisted iron. Dusty metal spiderwebs gripped like the hands or talons of giants submerged in the quicksand of human violence, power without impunity, and drowned in the thundering result. How many lives were lost there, how many invisible bodies which were now terminated, sparks invisible to human connection even as their physical presence had been rendered unseen collateral damage. There had never been anything as huge and awful as this and it certainly could not be covered by mere stone, by the mess of itself. It surpassed reality and met only with the propaganda imaginations of the speeches meant to terrify people into arming the government which ironically gave it the exact ability to ~~the~~ inflict this madness on itself, on its own citizens, the ones which formed it.. at least at the lowest rung in a society supposedly devoid of ancient and "constricting" or "inhuman" caste systems. Oneon hadn't ever really believed in the evil of outmodded or misunderstood concepts for the simple reason that there was evil he could understand in the fads of contemporary systems. It was so apparent there was no reason to make anything up, but so disturbing that it brought on a general apathy towards it as well. If it is comfortable enough now then the difficulty in changing things is pushed to the future when the tipping point occurs and change is forced because it is inevitable. That time was now and Oneon, for all his personal problems, found himself at the epicenter of an inevitable revolution in Core City and perhaps all of humankind, for reasons he could not fathom, but for the obvious fact that the city had destroyed part of itself in a fit of crazed greed. And rather than heal immediately, the insanity was persisting and he felt more violence was imminent.

Was he ready?

"Are you ready?" Bourne was staring at him.

His arm was a cannon, he had not felt the change, he switched it back.

"I don't know." He lowered his head as Bourne shook his slightly.

"Come on then, let's get to this 'safe house'."

"First the Quick Gliders," Sam said facing upwards and eyeing the downward-facing spotlights which swung ever closer.

"Why do we have to lure them down, why don't we attack them up high, like on a rooftop or something?" Oneon asked.

"We don't have any firepower."

"I do."

"You're what they want, I'm not risking that."

"It's a risk down here," he stared steadily, ~~the~~ meeting hers evenly which was flat.

"And it's not your decision." She raised an eyebrow.

"Oneon, please." Bourne said.

"You're in shock, young sir."

"No... well, maybe, but I don't want to be chased on that stupid bike again."

He was turning, walking back in that crummy building, he was not being stopped, and his insides all felt suspended. Was he dreaming? He supposed he would find out.

"Stop him," Bourne pleaded.

"Sir?"

"We follow... and assist," Sam said checking her blade, armor closing in on her without a flinch or any physical acknowledgement. It became a skillful trick to irritate the protection without anxiety. Little bastard is right, but he will need our help. ~~was!~~

Oneon had not entered the building, he was scaling the side of it as a rock climber, never pausing, ascending smoothly and acrobatically up the ledges, sills, and



pipes. Age and abuse had textured the building in a way that made it, for him, a natural ladder. E followed nimbly but waved Sam in whom Bourne followed.

"I didn't meet my New Year's resolutions," she grumbled by way of explanation.

"They're going to see him!" Bourne said.

"Maybe, but the ~~spottlights~~ they're looking down — I didn't expect that, why would they? Clever little bastard," she said again with grudging respect. Oron could

not hear this, of course, even though it came out as an unintended compliment.

"And the armor will not reflect light, it'll appear as granite as anything else."

"Where are we going?"

"Fuck if I know... up."

Oron himself did not know where, he had surprised himself with his route, his decision to utilize his climbing practice which he had never used to scale the outside of any building — well, at least this high anyway. He felt the stone scuff and scrape under his hands, that hand which seemed inordinately good at gripping, and under his feet, breath puffing in steam clouds, bouncing off this solid man-made cliff and enveloping his head in a man-made cloud. Yes, he was making a manly decision both in its stubborn stupidity and for any courageous mistakes that would follow but also in its independence and pragmatism. "Am I wrong?" he thought, but it didn't matter because he was going up and he would take them down. He felt as an active vine, gripping the wall, and moving out of time at an energetic speed. He loved this feeling, the tactile feeling, the progress, his muscles burning but soothing his burned mind. He felt the heat of strain cool his brain, putting him into a simple meditative state. Breath, focus, yes a simple goal: up. He knew they were following but he didn't care... or not care, it was irrelevant.

Passing a window he paused as a glider zoomed close by him without stopping, without raising any kind of alarm, and without a sound beyond the bizarre zipping sound it made by its hair-raisingly fast propulsion. They reminded him of cinematic ray gun blasts, though shaped triangular and leaving ~~no~~ no flashy trail of energy. They buzzed above the street, projectiles with no parent gun, and the windows vibrated in their passing, yearned at their sonic presence. Behind them, in populated buildings, people would be pressing their hands to them and looking out wild-eyed, trying to determine the state of things in the lack of any decent explanation, the odd quiet, the new machines, and waiting for the media to make an assessment while telling themselves it was probably nothing. Unfortunately the media also had to obey curfew, so they would only be reporting on information provided by the Kops, from Central, from William.

He grappled the upper lip of the building and pulled himself onto the roof. In occupied ones he would have had to navigate ~~go~~ around solar-shielded wind fans and leafy rooftop gardens, but this building was bare bones, born a skeleton from the start and never given proper flesh or tenants. These seemed as decorative pillars or toys in a play area, the right size as per their neighbors but gutless. Where had he ~~to~~ gotten these guts, did he get them in exchange for losing his mind, and would he lose them soon too? How long could he hold to the righteousness, and the courage he felt in this stage, doing something he was good at and had been doing for years, despite his brother's protests about the danger of it, and receiving absolutely no encouragement for it. Perhaps climbing as a rebellious activity made it that much more appealing, but he felt it as an instinctual need, the balm for his soul and he had always fantasized about the counter-balance... of falling, going low after getting so high. It had become more interesting to him the more it appeared it a solution to both his passion for life and finalizing life itself, of death.



"Hold it right there, son." He froze, staring several guns in the face, fully armed kops all standing ready with their pistols pointed at him. Apparently they had not gotten away so clean after all and in a moment they would be completely surrounded. Oneon's heart raced, time graced him with her slowest dance, and for the split second even as he acted he wondered why they had not fired. His courage left him but he was not abandoned by some kind of battle instinct and rather than flee, he flung himself directly in their midst, a battering ram towards a hopeless siege.

It was over before he could even consider how rash it had all been.

"Damn, you could've waited." Sam said, stripping the unconscious group of their weapons. She held her sword at the middle, like a staff, and was panting slightly. All that softness she had intended to erase but stuck to her in the easiness of the beat, no doubt. E was helping Bourne up who stared at him with what could be construed as anything from fear to loathing, but Oneon did not know which part of it was intended for his irresponsibility and which for future his potential, dangerous potential. He had struck the foremost soldier with his right fist which looked more angular, more "punchy" than he remembered. In fact, the knuckles looked ~~triangular~~, sharper at the tops and the man's helmet had been properly smashed in. Bourne adjusted the ~~sun~~ shades. Quick Gliders continued their fast patrols, oblivious.

"Time to act, we won't have long before these guys are missed."

"Gliders converging, sir."

Oneon nodded and stood up on the edge of the building. His hair fluttered in the wind, his heart fluttered in his chest, and he pulled his helmet down on his head. It seemed a bit silly, probably ineffective, considering what he was about to do.

"What are you doing?" Bourne asked, eyes widening behind glasses, voice tinged by panic. He did not see this, Oneon's back was to them, but he could feel the stares, hear their movements towards him. He did not know, he would figure it out when it was necessary. This was his act of premeditated attack, no, murder. He knew it was for self-defense, for their survival, for the unraveling of this mystery that swallowed his pathetic existence, but that did not make it an easy act to swallow. He was clearing his head, thinking of the fall, because overthinking it would make it impossible, ~~make~~ cause him to choke, and now they depended on him, he depended on them, he was about to depend on himself and test himself. Had he ever done that? Life was a constant test.

Witoost! The air gasped, he heard them gasp, he heard those ray gun insects, and somehow he imagined he could hear his breath coming in slow, steady pulls, but that could not be. He imagined he could see their faces, those pilots, and feel their shock, awe, fear, impossible, a flying man, a falling boy, their falling faces as they faced their doom. From above and elsewhere the Quick Gliders remained true to their moniker and flew on unabated, but they did not turn again, they crashed into buildings where the straightness of even core city had to curve, skew, and place obstacles in their path.

It was still dark, too dark to see at a distance without light, especially downward but the three rushed to the edge anyway and looked to the street below. Even Bourne with his Night Shades could not make anything out except a figure, his brother, so far down on the pavement, but he did not see blood and that gave him a glimmer of hope.

"Fuckin' A," Sam said. "Let's get down there now."



Sam and Bourne rushed for the stairway but E leapt nimbly over the side, his barrel-chest sailing over with legs lifting up agilely as he used his left hand and vaulted his body clean over, looking attentively down but without any spec of concern showing. "E!" Sam spun momentarily to see the top of his head and short brown hair disappear into the cold Autumn wind whipping this point high up above the city, swore, and kept up with Bourne who breathed acid and pumped his limbs mercelessly, flying down the stairs as one chased by the devil himself.

Oneon heard the distant crashes of the Quick Glinders. He sighed and closed his eyes, shutting out the sky above him, the stars tearing cold white holes in the blackness above him. All light at night was merely a reflection, used, recycled, indirect. Even the mother moon hid her embarrassed face out of his sight, lit by the sun whose light burned the night even in relative absence. He smelled the cold, if one can smell a temperature at all, that's what it must be, but there was warmth too, blood, his blood, and he smelled this as a liquid running from his nose, the side of his mouth, and his eyes. No, those might have been tears, but not of joy or pain or sorrow or any emotion whatsoever but rather the effect on his ducts of being beaten by the frigid air on his stunning descent from the top of a skyscraper. How he could think, he could not tell, but imagined it wouldn't last long. Why he hadn't thought earlier about the dangers of leaping off a building struck him as mildly funny and he chuckled which hurt his chest. And what had actually transpired in his fall seemed to have been out of his control yet driven by his intention, a simple but determined will expressed. ~~He~~

He had jumped, even, jumped from that lip of a tombstone, the remnants of Builder enthusiasm for survival, spurning it in an apparent heroic suicide that ~~he~~ left him incomprehensibly alive. Yes, he realized now, he was not dying for he felt something quite lifelike ... in his belly.

"Oneon!" he couldn't place the voice immediately. "Are you okay, young sir?"

How had he gotten here so fast? "I'm hungry," he replied.

E chuckled, a rumbling in the barrel, a barrel full of laughs. "

"Does this make me look flat?" Oneon added, enjoying the sound of this new friend's laughter, a very friendly and not robotic sound at all. How could he had ever assumed he was a robot. "I'm sorry I thought you were a robot, E."

"I do'nt know why I thought that."

"Well, I did just follow you down fifty stories by a similar method of transport, sir. The stairs have never been my favorite. Why not just 'fall' I've always thought." he laughed again and so did Oneon, but it hurt his chest, though not as much as ~~he~~ would have thought.

"I landed on my legs, but now I'm on my back, I lost my balance when I struck the ground. I don't understand how I survived."

"Perhaps you are like me, sir. Sam will find out at the safe house."

"You're not going with us?"

"No, sir. I have to get back to Central. The hieristic brought working radios and Sam will need me there."

"What if they catch you?"

"We all must take risks, sir. You just demonstrated that, although I don't think you understood how much you were risking."

"Huh?" What had he risked besides killing himself and the pilots in the process. It would have been a worthy sacrifice. As if reading his thoughts, E responded to them in turn.

"You are important to your brother and you are our charge now too; your life is our responsibility because you have some role yet to play. Sir."



"So the crazy little jack-ass lives," Sam practically wheezed with pleasure and displeasure. "Don't fucking do that again, I'm not as young as I look."

Bourne rushed to his side and helped him up. "Careful, brother, you may have broken something."

"I'm fine, I can do this myself." He pushed Bourne away and scrambled unsteadily to his feet. Bourne frowned with his brows but his eyes were piercing blue, steady, and slightly watery. "I don't-" Bourne started.

Sam, as usual, interrupted him with a bit of pragmatism. "Sorry, boys, but we have to move NOW." She turned to E, patting him on the shoulder. "I need you at Central, E."

"Yes, sir." He handed her a radio which she clicked onto her belt, tossing away the broken one that Gumbo had damaged and fitted in the ear piece. "I've set the channel already, it should be secure. Please tell me when you arrive."

"Should, E?"

"The way things are going, sir, I cannot guarantee anything."

"I'm just teasing," she gave him a short look, longer than most, that Oneon felt was an intimate thing to witness and he turned away embarrassed; he noted that Bourne did the same. "Be careful."

"Always, sir." And he left with the riot bots who had stayed by the bike and milled around while all the excitement was happening. Their presence probably made it appear, at a distance if anyone looked, like there was a squad already investigating this section which helped buy them some time. The squad knocked out on the roof, however, would raise an alarm as soon as they were found missing. At least there were no cruisers chasing them, Oneon thought, as the bike rumbled to life and they got on.

"I'm driving," Sam said to Bourne who had started it up. He looked straight at her seriously, not defiantly.

"No, ma'am. I can ride this better than you, just tell me where we need to go and I'll get us there."

Sam raised her eyebrows but her lips twitched into a slight smile. "You'll sit behind me then, and you prefer a backseat driver?"

"Just no eating on the bike."

She chuckled and Oneon rolled his eyes as his stomach growled in protest. He climbed on after her and Bourne raced the bike down the black street, headlamps out, a banshee (banshey?) howling in the darkness. She spoke into his ear so that Oneon could not hear and her hair, stray strands of it, flapped into his face from the sides of her angular helmet. Bourne was nodding and they turned and turned again, rolling smoothly over the canal arches and even through narrow alleyways here and there.

His brother could ride but he had never had the opportunity to ride this far and fast through the city, not near the heart of it, not even as close as they were now. He was forced to take it out on the fringe, at night, and dodge the meager patrols out there. Combustion engines were illegal, driving licenses were expensive, and Bourne's bike possessed the first while he did not have the latter. He was underage, 18 being the minimum, and this was his only overt act of rebellion against the system which he otherwise accepted. Oneon was sure it was to attract girls and not meant to ruffle the feathers of the authorities, now the girl he wooed with it was a woman of the authorities. He sighed, rolling his eyes in his mind, pondering the irony of it. How old was Sam anyway? She was taller than him, taller than Bourne, and her face spoke of experience but displayed youthful expressions of exuberance. Her speech both implied a commanding nature gained by years but subtracted from that the amount she swore or used language he had never heard any officer or, heck, any government employee use. Wasn't it illegal or something? He supposed they all were employees of the government in some way or another, this being a relatively small oasis and everything leading back to Central.



Sam's body tensed and he felt it crawl with armor plates expanding themselves. Only then did he realize that he had been hugging a warm, feminine body with all the curves, softness, and ... wait why was she arming herself? Unfortunately the noise of the bike and its unique look gave it away even if they were not running with headlights; there were always other ways to see and other sense besides. They were bathed in bright spots of light and he heard bullets eating up the street around them, Bourne instinctively turned sharply into a side alleyway to buy them some time even though Sam shouted against it.

"Trust me!" he yelled back at her, clenching his teeth, and leaning lower against the front of the bike. Although it was stronger than the electric frictionless engine (EFE) cycles, it also held three passengers and so the speed was not that much greater. Adding to that the difficulty of navigating with those three separate bodies all reacting to gravity and momentum, Oneon recognized the massive challenge this put on his brother and he became afraid. He did not trust him, but they had no choice - unless they could kill them? No! Why had his mind gone there? He felt angry at his brother and their pursuers and his hand began changing against his will even as his fingers tried to keep their grip on Sam, who herself was becoming difficult to hang onto with armor covering most of her body. He wanted to shut his eyes but he didn't want to be surprised by their crashing or being hit by bullets, but he didn't want to see that either. He sucked in air and blinked, unable to concentrate on his surroundings, the fear turning to anger and anger to fear, his heart beat a freight train in his chest and his muscles surged with an electric energy, adrenaline, caffeine, something of that sort, he felt nervous energy melding with his anxious mood and there was a scary power in it. He didn't want it, he didn't want any of this, but he had and he marveled at how the things he secretly desired were now being given to him at the precise wrong time. He finally felt a potential that he could use and did not feel impotent or weak or small and he wanted to use it, his body wanted to use it, but his mind reeled at the thought of more murder.

He smelled exhaust, he heard more shots, he saw puffs of smoke, sparks, and holes appear before them. Bourne took them up over more arches, careening down the opposite sides with frightful speed, and turning on a dime as if he were alone, the bike groaning under their combined weight and very nearly getting out of his control on some of the hairpin maneuvers he began to pull through the same alleys, or had they crossed into a new section. The city seemed to be an endless repetition of itself, a limitless grid of repeated parts, like a factory gone crazy with output and endless combinations boiling down to the same reused patterns. He saw it rushing past him and rushing up to them and he knew it rushed back towards their followers, pursuers, Kops prepared to use deadly force that would inevitably hit them if they weren't trying only to scare them; heck if even there was that then the possibility of a mortal accident was too high. It is us or them, he thought to himself but he did not want to watch any more death. Maybe he hadn't pulled any of these triggers himself; if he felt an internal will driving him to do it then it wasn't really him. He squeezed his eyes shut and gripped Sam with his left hand while swing his right about behind him, squeezing that trigger he found within. A new muscle he could flex, an itch, a handle, a ghost limb that had none of the usual joints but he found natural to access none the less.

"Don't you have an oil slick or some shit like that?" Sam yelled at Bourne.

"No! ~~Now~~ I'm busy! Shut up!" Oneon would've found this bitterly amusing if his thoughts weren't elsewhere. He did not hear any shots, no thrum or boom or sparks or sizzle. Nevertheless the beams of light on them suddenly went haywire like strobes and bullets rained out sporadically near and nowhere near them. He heard yelps of surprise, almost literally yelps, and yells, and grunts, scraping, the sound of bikes turning and hitting their sides, sliding behind them, and Bourne didn't question any of this, he just kept driving.



They rumbled over some train tracks as Oneon replaced his arm on Sam's side who twitched slightly. "Ah, Oneon, your hand is really hot, I can feel it even through the armor." He looked at it, letting his eyes open, and saw it practically glowing with heat and steaming. This was a particularly steamy night when one could see one's breath come out in dragon puffs at each exhale. What was it that made this more apparent one night rather than another? It wasn't any colder than usual, was there more moisture in the air? He figured there was an explanation given in school that he had merely missed. He realized that he was missing school, even being ignored, missing the ability to have no ability, revel in it, and sulk in the back of a classroom, doodling on paper and messing around in his thoughts, fantasizing about powers like those he just demonstrated and having no inkling of the sickening feeling they might give him as they did now. He did not know what he had done, he had not seen, and he didn't know what this horrible thing on his arm was capable of, connected as it was to his mind in a way that felt altogether too natural, too easy, and the effort came from stemming the tide of destruction rather than brining it up to bear.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled and pulled his hand away. The bike continued to rumble, vibrating, and he realized they were riding along the railway tracks. It was technically safe at this time of night, no trains ran except for delivery and those were some hours off yet. The spiderwebs of cable cars distorted the sky above them in this part and they must be backtracking through living sections of the city. It was difficult to tell which direction they were facing since so much of the city repeated itself. The Builders were methodical in their construction rather than imaginative and they built solely for the purpose of shelter and the industry that could be contained therein. Since the time of the Builders, no new construction on any scale besides refinements and new connections had taken place. They had added the cable cars ~~to~~ and sky bridges, but these had been intended from the beginning. The outer buildings were shorter than the inner ones, in relation to the center, and they got progressively higher until reaching Central which was the highest building in the city. It was also very near, within a couple of blocks, to the ocean which crashed against a narrow inlet to the east and the waves added to the usual mist and drear. Core City had originally been some kind of geological base and was a literal hotbed of geothermal energy, making it an ideal spot to form a base on in the wake of the energy crises caused by the Collapse. Or which led to the Collapse, Oneon sometimes got his history mixed up. What caused what? One thing he did remember was that at the time of the Collapse there was a lot of government and media collusion and misdirection which made it hard for the few historians studying the event to determine exactly what went wrong. And what added to his difficulty in remembering was the student sitting across the aisle from him: Nicky.

Nicky! Beautiful, intelligent, funny. Well, he supposed she must be funny also if she had the other requisite attributes to be the love of his life. Not only did she sit next to him but was his neighbor across the hall at home; he could not believe his luck. Life appeared to be looking up just as it was starting to get him down. His first year of high school was both awful and hopeful, full of fear and hope. ~~He~~ He met her during the summer when him and some other kids had gone slightly beyond the fringe to where more greenery occurred. In less than a century, nature and the wilds had reclaimed the land that man had once tried to take and lay claim to, partition and sell, but she honored no deeds and took it back, recollected, without any forewarning and with a speed that surprised everyone.



"Are you popular?" This had been one of the first things Nicky had asked him. Her family had moved from a more middleclass neighborhood down to the outskirts that Oneon called home, loathed to call home, and he was embarrassed to admit her into his neighborhood just as he blushed at this question and told her that he didn't care about popularity. He had meant ~~it~~ it to sound cool, but coming out of his mouth, in his young voice, into the face of this angel, it merely sounded weak and silly and he regretted saying it, or anything. It would've been better to keep quiet altogether, wouldn't it have? He didn't know, but she was nearly his age and pretty and he could not think straight around her. He rarely tried thinking on his feet during conversation anyway, preferring instead ~~to~~ to opt-out with an "I don't care" or make a semi-fishing statement and then escape before anyone could say anything to the contrary, or even to support him. He felt any compliments he received were disingenuous and people were just pitying him, giving him some level of credit merely for being Bourne's brother - the golden child who did everything right and whom everyone loved. Bourne. Nicky. Nicky!

"We have to get Nicky!" he shouted to Bourne, but of course Sam was in the way.

"Who's Nicky?" And no, we don't, we have to get out of here." she replied.

"She's in danger! She was with me ~~at~~ when those men came!"

"We're in danger, brother!" Bourne shouted back tersely, angling off the tracks and up a pedestrian stairway, temporarily halting conversation in the storm of bumping and the bike squealing to climb the steps unintended for wheels of any kind. At some point in the past, personal transport had been a luxury that many people sought and invested in with tiny vehicles that did not require them to walk but rather just point in the direction they wanted to go. Oneon could never grasp this, the point of it, when it would eat up massive amounts of energy and waste the energy of the person who did not have to move. He thought of how people sat around now, wasting energy, while plugged into their televisions and virtual worlds and video games and tried to picture that same thing on the move, on wheels mounted by working legs, feet supporting a zonked out zombie wheeling through crowds of the same. How odd it must have been, but this was not on his mind at the moment.

"We have to save her!" he tried again, yelling it with his jaw muscles working furiously. This idea took hold in his mind and it became a focal point of his anger, for his discontent with Bourne. Both of them were resisting him when they knew he was right, but Bourne knew better than Sam and he could help. Instead he was being selfish and trying to save himself, assuring that he would retain his much sought after safety as well as the glory of whatever future triumphs he would accomplish. Meanwhile poor Nicky, that beautiful girl, was probably being captured, tortured, maybe even killed by those awful men they had barely fought off earlier.

"Don't be a fool, BB!"

Augh! He HATED that nickname and how easily it came to even the lips of his own brother. His brother whom all his friends could look up to and everyone could hold up as a model to his own ill behavior, a model to his own ugly looks, a model to his own stupid brain. He got his hand-me-downs and he got his fame only as scraps from his brothers. He didn't live in his brother's shadow, he got known from it, that was his social home, his birthplace. His brother gave him his social existence, snipped a piece of that shadow, and turned it into this little, skinny kid with ratty hair that people then referred to not by name but rather "Bourne's Brother" which morphed into "BB" for short. It was a keystone, a linchpin, and the pin on a grenade which drove him absolutely wild with fury. It demeaned him to less than a human being, to a PART of his brother, a snip of his shadow, and no shadow can ever leave its master or interact with his world, it can only grow larger or duplicate in its blackness. An impotent army at his brother's feet, a war in Oneon's head, fuel for his hormonal rage and puberty blues.



"Ow, kid, don't squeeze me so hard, I'm not a toy," Sam said to him.

"I'm not a kid!" he yelled, but he knew he was and he felt like being one in this moment, he didn't want to be sane, he wanted to fall back into a comfortable tantrum.

"Whatever you are, just stop, okay? We'll figure out how to get Nicky once we're to the safe house. By the way," she paused. "Thanks for whatever you did to those riders. I ~~was~~ was having second thoughts about firing at them and you took the initiative, again."

He felt the wind of his anger drain out of him and a moment of pride swell up in its place. He was being thanked by a general and someone who was someone, at least before she was deposed by whatever craziness had been brought on by William and those thugs. What HAD he done to those riders? He didn't want to think about that or his selfish brother.

"Where is this safe house?"

"Beyond the south side, to the west into the wilds."

"How long will it take to get there?"

"Not long, we're already in the fringe and, I believe, out of immediate danger. We've never had to rally against a small target like this and one that is escaping; most of our defenses are about fortification and not stopping people who try to leave."

"What about sentry guns?"

"It's true that there are some of those around the borders, but again they're facing outward. Most of our difficulty will be with the border guards.

Oneon shivered at the thought of more killing just to get away. Were they that important that their lives trumped those of any other.

"Why are they fighting for him?" Oneon asked.

"He's highly respected and there's probably now a bounty on my head. No one, or very few, want to risk their necks to save mine. Core City is all about the greater good, mass survival, and we're a couple of eggs to crack."

Oneon did not like that image, of cracking and bleeding out, his insides contained in a thin yellow membrane that split and leaked out, spreading in an oily mess. He saw again a pool of blood growing in his mind, from that man fallen backwards that he had shot in the face. And he saw the gypsy he had killed on accident; or was it accident? That man who had attacked him, who lay on top of him, and bled into his face from his smashed nose and dead eyes staring straight at him, but he hadn't seen then. He had been too angry at his brother, his stupid brother who ruined everything, took everything he wanted, everything he needed.

He tried to bring himself back into the current moment. "How are we going to get out of the city?"

"Speed, luck, ... daring. You'll do alright, kid." Sam said.

That wasn't much of a plan, that wasn't a plan at all. They were barreling for the edge of the city, areas guarded by the most weaponry, the most highly-trained Kops. Early on when the city was being formed it needed some sort of militia as well as a police force, but these two things mixed and mingled as people from armies, local police forces, and national guards came together as part of the masses trying to survive and looking for the right leadership. None of their previous banners would work for the future, the leaders saw that it would cause too much friction where one group was given more prestige than another, and taking away symbols caused immense loss of morale. So they created a new symbol to unify them: Kops. It was simple to say, the "K" came from the typical Germanic way of producing that sound rather than the confusing "C" and was birthed, somewhat, from the idea of "black ops" combined with "cops", police and special forces. However, the border patrols tended to be the more brave and blood thirsty types, and also where the latest militaristic inventions were sent to test on unsuspecting or aggressive outsiders trying to get in.



Not only ~~the~~ did a wall surround the outer portions of the city, but regular and highly militant patrols guarded it as well. Sam did not know how they were going to get through, persay, and no known escape tunnels existed to circumvent the protection. That is, some secret ways must exist, because criminals such as Hassan used them and immigrants were always getting into the city but the law enforcement constantly patched up what few holes int found.

Immigration was always a hot topic for Core City and citizenship was a difficult process. Outsiders were generally mistrusted and ~~of~~ the processes for getting in quite complex and almost torturous. Those born within gained immediate and absolute rights that they could take for granted while outsiders must earn them through strenuous tests and demonstrations of what could only be called fieltly. All legal laliens were required to serve, on a volunteary basis, in community service. It's true that children, during school, were also required to perform community service, but for them it usually amounted t to small things such as picking up trash, painting some building or room, or otherwise easy tasks. Immigrants often got stuck with dirty jobs, literally, involving sewer, security, and construction. Thus, much of the improvements to Core City were beintg done by those who were not legal citizens at all and may never become as such.

Yet there was aobiously enough room to house all of the people trying to com in and the ones already inside that were fighting for citizenship. The next question would be to the resources required to support these people, but ironi cally they were supporting the very system which did not claim to have enough to support them in the first place. It was all strange and twisted and Oneon did not believe anyone truly understood the symbiotic nature of the arrange- ment; not those in government nor those poor souls who attempted intigration into the society which he did not particularly favor. From his perspective it was hard to understand why anyone would want in, when he wanted out.

And now they literally had to get out, out of the city, and out of the socie ty that he had always had a disdain for, that felt constricting and calaus- trophobic and far too convenient. It ididn't help that he also felt shunned by it and the city's denizens. There was no sense of adventure, they were trapped in a cycle of comfort that seemed to have no end and he yearned for danger and a sense of importantce that he felt could never be achieved under the thumb of his big brother.

Since there were no cars and enven though COre City was rather large, it did not take long to reach the fringe once they had shaken their pursures, or rather once Oneeon had mysteriously taken care of them. He did not want to think about what happen but he dreaeded what lay before them and a sense of impending doom came over him. What else could they do besides rush headlong into it but at the same time what would it accomplish. It made him wonder about the cylcical nature of life, that is, if it repeated endlessly and we merely forgot easch previous incarnation, each previous iteration of the same mistakes. Were the thoughts different but only the actions the same? That would explain those moments when he felt out of control of his own destiny, and even his own body, where he thought one thing but did another. Yet at the same time he believed wholeheartedly in his sense of will manifesting into action and so couldn't help but come to the conclusion that dhe didn't know himself all that well. He was doing wehat he needed, what he wanted, and he wa s still here afterall, yet the actions that went on at his bidding semed diametrically opposed to his wishes. Maybe his wishes were not his needs.



"What are ~~are~~ we going to do?" Bourne said. "We're getting very close." This time it was Bourne, his confident older brother, expressing uncertainty and for an odd reason, a somewhat blackhearted reason, this gave Oneon more hope than he had before, maybe he could solve this or help solve it and maybe they weren't so bound for death as he had thought.

"I don't know, I don't know!" Sam shouted back, flustered by her own uncertainty and not their pestering, for she was persterring herself as well internally and no answers were coming. They were simply moving too fast for anyone to think properly and she knew they'd be driving into a relative trap with everyone out there looking for them and knowing exactly where they were, probably, and also just as probably which gate they'd be exiting through. Sneaking was out of the question, at this point they relied almost solely on speed. It would take time to mobilize enough Kops to the correct point and yet she knew that's exactly what was happening; they would be setting up blocks at all major exits. At the very least they would have to find a way out without using the roads, but how to get the bike through a building or the wall at the edge?

"Sir?" Sam's radio suddenly crackled.

"Talk to me E," Sam answered tersely waving to Bourne to pull the bike off somewhere before they went too far. He went down into an alley down some stairs as E's calm voice calmed them. First he advised them against their current route and then suggested an alternative.

"It seems the bombed sector also wrecked a nearby outer wall and ~~it~~ it had been exposed to the wilds. Whatever he used to do this damage, sir, was imprecise although it seems almost too perfect the way the wall was smashed by way of a building falling across it."

"Are you saying we have to head back?"

"Yes, sir, otherwise you'd face a prepared force at any exit you intended on trying and patrolling the walls you think might have weak spots. At the bombed sector there is a new exit, a lot of confusion, and leadership appears to be contested. No one here is sure who is in charge, but there is a strong group with the most power that is consolidating its hold and I'm sure that William is at the center of it. You are still branded a fool and treasonous, unfortunately sir."

"Unfortunately my ass, this is fucked up, but at least I'm not working for that psychopath. What the hell are they thinking?"

"Given the amount of destruction he's caused and his wanton behavior, I don't think anyone wants to challenge him, sir. Everyone who is confused has their own life to think about and those who support you will not say so openly until the dust settles."

"I might be dust by that point too, I hope some have grown balls before then"

"Indeed, sir. I am doing my utmost to organize things while staying under the radar as it were. I have to go now, you understand."

"Yes, E, thank you for your help. We'll think about it."

"Not long, sir, good luck."

"What's there to think about?" Bourne said, he wasn't asking. "Going back is insanity and getting out any other way is as well. We're trapped, we should hide."

"Hide where and do what? With gypsies, criminals?"

"I'd rather hide than get us killed. Why do we need to get out of the city anyway?"

"I've told you, there's a safe house. We don't have time to argue like this, so let's just figure out what we're going to do and go do it."

"You're giving us an option?" Oneon asked, surprised.



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"Sure kid, we're in this together. And as your brother pointed out, every option I have is relatively insane."

"Relatively? What about hiding? Until this blows over?"

"And what in the meantime? We still risk our lives but can do nothing to protect the ones we care about nor figure out what his happening to the city. This isn't just about us running away."

"No," Oneon agreed. "It's not." And we/ can't hide from this, because something big is happening and somehow I started it with whatever this is."

"Brother this isn't some kiddie game, this isn't a bowl of cherries, this is ~~real~~ life and not just some adventure." Bourne said angrily.

"Why do you think that way, that I am just some little child? I know this is real, I know it better than you ever could."

"Do you? And why is that, because it's your arm they want?"

"Are you just jealous because it's not YOURS? You've always had that arm to show off and now it's this secret one that isn't yours?"

"You two aren't helping me much by arguing," Sam interjected. "Let's head back towards the wrecked section and try to take it aslow, out of sight. Maybe we can give them the slip. At least until we've made up our minds."

They grumbled about this but there was nothing to be done for it at the moment and so Bourne began a much slower, almost laborious journey back to where they had come, back to their mother's grave, and back towards another, just as certain doom. That place would be swarming with Kops looking for them as well as just trying to figure out what to do. Despite being angry, Bourne did an excellent job of keeping out of plain sight. All of the moments had he spent doing this in his free time paid off and even Oneon was grudgingly impressed with his uncanny knowledge of passages through buildings, between buildings, under bridges, railway tunnels, along stairwells and inside stairways, even inside buildings which were abandoned and easily accessible. So when Sam complimented him on this, Oneon could not fault her, but he still did not want to hear his brother receive anymore compliments, he didn't care if their lives depended on his ability to keep them hidden until they could figure out a plan. At least this time, they had weapons, Sam had taken guns off those Kops on the rooftops and ... and he wouldn't have to kill anyone, maybe he could just provide cover fire.

More than the idea of all those people who could catch them, faceless, justified justice dealers out to quell whatever this was and put them in graves or jail as criminals, rather than them, Oneon did not want to retreat towards his mother. He wanted to get away from her, live or dead. He was sorry she was dead, sorry in an intellectual sense, in a sense that he understood she made sacrifices for them as one understands that other countries are full of straving people. This didn't bring about any emotion ~~in~~ in him besides the usual resentment. Not only did she make him feel guilty, small, and bad but now she made him feel sad for her sacrifice. No, he would not feel sad, so he felt that resentment that she was trying to make him feel that way - even if she didn't do it on purpose.

Even Bourne must have felt something similar, for Lilee had not been good to him in recent years either. Oneon recalled when he had been given the opportunity, field trip as it were, to go to Central's laboratories and hear a speech by William himself, she ~~through~~ through a fit, an actual fit, and forbade him to go - she ~~she~~ even tore up the permission slip in front of his face. She heard his barrage of arguments, growing more heated than Oneon had ever heard his brother get, and she delivered them back in turn, shooting them down with the divine fury of a mother's rights over her sons. Both of them were incensed and if he thought about it enough, he saw that it had never been the same between them since. Bourne must have thought, rather he expected, that his accomplishments would bear fruit in more freedom and that was not the case



. Instead they purchased him nothing of the sort, a cage appeared out of nowhere whereas Oneon had always felt the bars. That was right around the time when he got his motorcycle too, but if Oneon himself thought that would buy HIMSELF more freedom then he too was disappointed, and he supposed he was. More than that, he had tried to run away for the first time that night. His brother up until then had been his friend, confidant, and a great storyteller, so he thought they were thick as thieves. Imagine how upset he was when, having run out to a nearby building, exploring its dark recesses with a lazy eye and having no plan other than the motivation of inspiration in doing something life changing, that his brother came and dragged him home; to the mother they were both beginning to despise. Thankfully she never stayed around long enough for them to have such an extreme dislike of her. How can you truly hate someone you hardly see and don't really know anymore? They learned to live without her and their partnership morphed into a controlling situation whereby Bourne became the lord and Oneon the peasant. He would've preferred the shiny knight and his loyal squire to this setup; he felt he had no honor or reputation at all to work with. Why were they heading back to her grave, the woman who had spawned them into the cold world, into their personal cold war, from a warm womb. How could they have grown so apart from such simple, naive, cliché circumstances. Oneon hated it, ~~th~~ he hated them, and hated himself for being a part of it; trapped in something against his will.

The bike motored on through the night, the noise of its motor banging against the unyielding stone walls of the nearby buildings. The age and series of improvements had caused an unevenness, because people do not stay sane or rational and although the builders had specified everything exactly, the city did not come out exactly to specification. There were streets that turned too sharply, alleys that were too cramped, and hills which upset the balance of vertical alignments to the effect that some buildings and streets rose a story or two or several above a neighboring one, creating urban cliffs which gangbangers and immigrants and plane lonely kids would tag, draw upon, or shit on with garbage, urine, or ... shit. Their lights weren't on and Bourne drove by the sight of his Night Shades. He must have thought them very clever and like the bike they were illegal for one so young. Too dangerous, so the laws implied, for young people to be having. Imagine all the mischief one could get up to being able to see in the night nearly as if it was day. Of course laws only punish bad behavior, they cannot create good behavior, so this did nothing to curb the so-called mischief; at least not in any measurable way, at least not in any realistically measurable way. The figures could always be shown to prove this point or that, but Oneon did not feel any more or less safe that these sorts of devices were illegal.

He wondered how many cameras saw him and them pass and if they were now converging on their location. He was actually surprised that they hadn't encountered a roadblock or Kops paratrooping out of the skies to decimate them. It didn't make sense that only a small number of motorcycles had been sent in pursuit. Where was all the force of Core City now and if it could not bring much to bear against this threat, what hope had they against something larger in the form of outsiders attacking? Were they just too small of a target? HE couldn't contain himself.

"Why aren't there more Kops trying to get us?" he asked Sam, between the hairs flying out of her helmet into his face.

"~~At~~ I don't know, kid. I would ask E, but I don't want to endanger him."

"The city is quieter than usual," Bourne observed, yelling back at them, turning his head to do so. "But we don't know what the media is saying."



"Media," Sam snorted. "They're just another arm of the government."

"I thought they weren't affiliated, there's no mayor of media." Oneon said.

"Not publicly, not directly., but they're in cahoots and one gets its data from the other as sure as the mother gives milk to her child."

Strange analogy, strange words, ONEon pondered them as much as what she was saying. He had never believed in the "fre Press" as it was sometimes called, a hold-over from the pre-Collapse days of civilization. Supposedly everyone had freedom of speech and the news media covered events independently to give every individual a chance to make up their mind about every event. That was the theory but eyeballs watching a television meant someone wanted to monetize and there was no bigger business than government. Everything came from them, everything that the Builders had setup had gone into a kernel of governing that was meant to minimize central control while maximizing safety and the security of human civilization, but those things often seemed opposed to one another. Surely they must have foreseen previous difficulties in history, but their focus had not been on a longterm government, the needs at the time were much more pressing. They could not have known how easily people would fall back into the same habits yet everyone can recite humanity's potential for avarice whether it exists in capitalism or relationships.

"We're riding into a trap," Bourne suggested.

"Most definitely," Sam answered without hesitating.

"When were you going to tell us?"

"You figured ~~out~~ it out, didn't you?"

"You were letting us ride blind into a trap?"

"Is there any other way to ride into one?"

Bourne grunted angrily but he kept up in the correct direction, back towards the dusty smoke Oneon imagined to still be churning up from that graveyard of knocked over buildings and all those buried, unseen bodies; dirty blood. What would they find there now? The unlit lampposts flew by. No parked cars, only bicycles here and there, and no trains. The city died every night and came back to life every morning for the morning commuters. Spare energy got used within the buildings it was generated, introvenously, so you would not see dryer exhaust spitting out the sides of buildings nor flashing signs. Everything turned off to conserve except for the bare necessities, which of course involved CEntral and anything the Kops and other troops needed to protect the city from outsiders and from itself. It was difficult to combat criminals in the dark, but only police were allowed to be out and they got as much power (firepower, electrical charge, etc.) as they needed to do their jobs. It could get quite one-sided, but few stood up to the possibility of a well-armed squad of Kops when citizens were not allowed to carry guns.

There was steam pockets here and there, coming from manholes and from the sides of railway tunnels. The fact that most energy in Core City came from geothermal sources made itself known in these. Most water was heated this way and, although filtered, admitted a slightly sulfuric smell that Oneon loathed and he preferred to torture himself with cold water than be subjected to the fartish scents of comfortable temperatures. Many did not notice the smell on their own bodies or pretended not too, but perfumes and colognes were very popular so he suspected that they could. He hated the smell of those even more than the farty water smell which glued itself to sweat, creating a new, very human odor which he felt was ugly but truthful and that's about how he felt about the truth and honest.y. It was always gross, and a tad horrible, but it was ... well it was the turth and honesty, pillars of virtue that he preferred to keep hidden underground like the girders that (pilons) were rooted underneath all the skyscrapers ... the spines of all those stone giants beuried beneath



h the earth, buried up to their necks, suffocating and filled with the sand of ungrateful people who wasted their time rotting in the best possible light, except when the darkness of curfew covered everything and they could climb into their soft beds and pretend the world was theirs.

Pipes must have busted along with the buildings themselves and he saw that the dust clouds he had imagined were actually mist from all that escaping heat and moisture. His favorite smell was dispersing itself over several city blocks, and entire sector, a big farty smelly mess and it was exactly what they needed. Who knew that the truth could set you free, or at this instance, cover your escape. The honest mist would keep them clear of danger. Why must what I think of come to pass, he thought. Or perhaps he had only thought of it because it made sense and now they were approaching the evidence. Whatever, it is upon me now ...

The mist was warm and the air blowing it on their faces was ice cold. The combination was decidedly unpleasant, but the chill made the scent less noticeable and so he did not feel as though used toilet water was sprayed onto his face; that was something. They hadn't quite reached the sector yet but he could see flashing and spinning lights glowing menacingly in the fog ahead, thick fog, fog that swallowed things and you could see their outline as you would a silhouette in color. Dreamlike silhouettes that smudged everything, and the sky is lost to void as are all paths. Everything leading into mist is a mystery and all paths disappear and become one as they become infinite. It's beautiful but terrifying. It's as if he could fall sideways into the midst, or up, but not down, because the ground is the only thing you can see. Now they were in the middle of the street and even the buildings to the sides were obscured.

"Perfect," Sam said. "I couldn't have asked for better."

"We can ask for better?" Oneon grumbled.

"Those are probably rescue workers; if there's any sense left in the city." she told them. "But let's avoid them, this bike is way too loud and we don't need speed here. Can you make it quieter."

"Yes," Bourne said, unconsciously whispering so that he had to repeat himself. He toggled something and kicked back the throttle and it sounded as though, it sounded nothing ... no sound came out and the bike's engine might as well have just died as it thrummed down to nothing and then all they could hear was the rubber on the pavement, as any frictionless cycle engine would make. This was a rubbery whine that reminded Oneon of electronics and he had no idea the bike was capable of this. Sam gave out a low whistle in spite of herself.

"Hybrid? That's..." she couldn't find the words, but Oneon struggled not to roll his eyes. He knew they couldn't afford something like this and considering how illegal this was and high-tech, he couldn't imagine where Bourne had acquired it. It suddenly dawned on him that Bourne had not been so shocked by his arm and he became darkly curious if he knew anything about it, if it were somehow related. He was keeping an awfully close watch on him over the past few years and it's true that it coincided with their growing apart, his trying to run away, and Lilee's pre mandate ... but also with the purchase of this bike.

The speed dropped with the gas engine and the whining became less obtrusive also. Three people on the motorcycle now seemed almost too much and Oneon felt their pace was agonizingly slow. Couldn't someone just run up and knock them off? The lights were getting closer and Bourne turned off into an alley but avoided a stairway up to a cross street. It would be impossible for this weak engine to pull them up any more vertical byways. All the tricks of horsepower were gone when the horses took a break. Bourne did not acknowledge the implied compliment, but instead said: "I know this area by foot, but I think I can navigate its streets too."



Oneon felt the lights in the fog were following them as eyes, but Bourne did not wait for them to catch a full glimpse of them. He wheeled in through doorways Oneon had not seen, through more empty corridors, and back out into the mist that pervaded everything, that turned this into some other world, that turned this into an incomprehensible dream. If other times had felt unreal then this certainly excelled past any of them, because nothing ever appears quite real in fog, fuzzy at the borders, indistinct until fully upon it, and blotting the lights largely in any amount of distance. Even though it was probably warmer, it felt colder in the presence of so much darkness. The darkness that now was magnified by the mist, water darkness, drowning, and all the buildings breathed that air that turned into clouds and it made Oneon think again why this night of any other fall night would have breaths which appeared more cloudy than others, when every exhale created a small storm, wisps that burned in the air as fire licking it, gray flames peeling off of living forms to set ghostly into the somber palette. It might have been beautiful if it wasn't so filled with anxiety, so filled with danger, and so impenetrable. It seemed that everywhere they turned there were more of those lights, flashing and glaring, penetrating and blinding, they shook with anger at his sins and threatened to close in upon them as a righteous vice that he felt they probably deserved.

Soon they ran out of periphery structures and they were riding quietly, drawing the mist in swirls behind them, through the recent ruins of the sector where people had gone for medical attention or lived with debilitating medical issues. He could see only lumps and muddled forms in the soupy blackness but he knew them to be bodies or parts of bodies or even just possessions of bodies, maybe children or dolls or computer parts, it didn't matter. All carnage blends together in a singularity of tragedy that the mind cannot fully grasp and he looked at them lamely, numbly, with what must have been shock and a sort of awe at the immense destruction and immensely horrible destruction wrought upon so massive of an area and so many people that were the farthest from deserving it. He wondered if his mom deserved it when so many times he had wished her dead and here was proof of it, ambiguous but still proof. If there were a hundred or a thousand or a thousand thousand bodies, why couldn't one of them be his mom. And then he thought with a certain dread, what if one of them wasn't her?! What if she was safely home or on her way home? All of this wanton destruction sort of distracted him from the question, distracted all of them, but what was the importance of Lillie? They could not discuss her without getting too fired up and the concept of her, her parental performance, and their psychological effects tended to outshine her as a person, her as someone besides their mother, and her as a potential key into the mystery of his arm and really him, himself. How did he get this and why did she give it to him? Did she have someone else do it? He wondered about his falling the last time they were here, taking out the Quick Gliders; what had been his motivation and why was he able to take a side seat to his subconscious and let his body take over the heavy lifting? He regretted her death as one regrets a distant cousin or uncle, but not directly not the intense pain or shock of a son losing his mother, and he doubted that Bourne felt it acutely either. They still seemed more bent on taking each other down than avenging her death, overcoming one another rather than bringing that murderous psychopath in power to justice. Yes, that's what they must do though, that would be the right thing, to bring that wily mad man to justice ... dead or alive. Oneon felt that William was one person, not even a person by his immoral actions, that he could see himself killing without batting an eyelash, at least without puking up another sandwich.



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"There's nothing left of these streets," Bourne said in a low voice.

"You can't find your way?"

"I don't know where we're going."

"And if you did?"

"There's nothing to follow to get there, no stars, and I don't have a compass." Bourne pulled up to a jagged section of wall that reminded Oneon of teeth sticking out of the ground, as if the giant's head had been blown off, buried up to the neck and the head blown off while trapped, how horrible. He felt dizzy by the disorientation of the fog and the lights here and there, flashing, flashing, spinning, spinning, and you could not tell what they belonged to, what kind of vehicles, cycle or cruiser or helicopter or space ship ...

"Isn't there a high wall near here, near this sector I mean?" Oneon asked.

"Yes, at the edge of the city, but it's quite a drop." Sam said, Bourne nodded in agreement but he gave Oneon a dubious look. "

"We can't get out that way brother," he said.

"We can't get out anyway, ANY WAY." Oneon protested, ~~why~~/"Why not that way?"

"That could be anywhere though, we don't-"

"It's that way," he said pointing off into the misty, farty, rubble.

Sam shrugged, "we need to try something. Let's see what we can do at that wall if it is where he thinks it is."

The rubber tires chewed on the grimy rock and debris, crunching it up as some awful beast might, and Oneon thought of stretched necks and massages and chiropractors instead of chewing, munching, bones, and bodies. He felt he could smell death through the stench of the fog, but maybe not, and he realized he was glad for the putrid smell, the sulfurous fart smell. It would have been much worse otherwise, eh was sure. Of course it was cold ... he stopped thinking as they heard voices and other vehicles moving around.

"Damn, this is going to take forever to clean up, whatever are we looking for anyway."

"I don't know, well I meant they told me that we'd know when we saw it and some woman too. Here's a picture of her."

"Huh, I think we're going to find more than just 'some woman' in this mess. Was that the bomb detonator she had?"

"Yeah, something like that. Can you believe that, a terrorist in this area of the city? No threat or anything, just BOOM, wow, what a horrible mess. We're going to be up all night."

"You think they'll get us some more light?"

"Fuck the light, they need to figure out how to get rid of all this mist."

Oneon realized they were talking about Lillie and that she had been framed for this massive destruction. It was a cruel twist of fate that someone, even someone that he loved, had given her self selfishly to charity, at least, for her own selfish reasons, but worked almost tirelessly, in atonement, almost in torture of herself, and the thanks she got was to be blamed for the deaths of several blocks of people infirm and straddling the poverty line. She had finally given herself wholly over to them and they took her and spit in her memory. It made Oneon angry and he saw Bourne tense against the front of the bike.

"I know those two," Sam said. "Don't worry about them, couple of idiots." But the words weren't that comforting. Is this the kind of thing she comforted her kids with? Oneon did not know if she had more than one, but they must be maladjusted if that's the best she could come up with under difficult circumstances.



"Fuck me," Sam breathed when they reached where Oneon had led them. A building at the edge had fallen neatly over the wall, and owing the sight to the quality of Builder construction, it had not broken but rather created a ramp down to the wilderness floor at the base of the wall. The mist was less thick here and they could see groups milling about, searching or something, and not too far away. "Too closek," she added.

"So," a voice came from behind them, a familiar voice. "It's like you come to me\$ as present, I did not even ask for it but here you are." It was Gumbo and he was not far away, marching up to them with confidence, smooth steps of long, thick legs over rubble, not pausing and in his giant gate that made him seem even larger, even more threatening.

"I'm not even going to ask how you found us," Sam said readying two guns and handing a third to Bourne who took it without taking his eyes off Gumbo.

"Ah! ME find you? No no, you found me! So delightful too. What are you going to do with those, do you think? Not shoot me, no, that would not be good for you." he shook his puffy face, and his advance stopped just short of them; he held out his meat arm and pointed at Oneon, his gaze coming to rest on his face, squinty eyes, evil grin, and breathing a bit heavily from just that small bit of exertion approaching. "I will be taking this one

"Like hell," and then Sam froze, they all froze, as a CTCHING sound pierced the muffled ambiance of mist and Oneon could not move a muscle, nor could Sam or Bourne he could see and he knew that they were done for. Freeman stepped out of the mist quickly and all was doomed, all happening so fast, w he wondered how long it would be until he could move or run away or fight back, but he knew that he was thinking faster than time was moving and it would only be a couple of seconds but it would be enough. He could already feel Gumbo's intention to shoot Sam and Bourne and what would they do to him and he felt that anger, still simmering, over Lilee's disparaged memory and he gripped it with all his internal might and pulled at that handle and he felt the air convulse, his lungs shook with fury, and his muscles spasmed with frustration but he did not move. It must have been only an instant and yet there was then a look of surprise on Freeman's face, the expressionless square mask opening up to surprise, and Oneon heard another distinct CTCHING of metal ice cubes shattering in a bicycle gear. An impossible noise, another impossible noise of the same make, and Gumbo had already removed little earbuds from his ears and his pinched face took on a shade of disgust and surprise and yet he stopped, Freeman stopped, and Oneon realized he had stopped them somehow ... but they were all unable to move and do nothing except stare at each other for the seconds that would keep them locked in stasis.

"You two again," a smooth voice sliced through the fog, vibrating distinctly and calmly as if strolling through a moonlit corridor. And a lithe man followed the voice, appearing at first as a shadow and then a suit inhabited by an Asian man with an equally smooth face to his voice and no smile, but Oneon felt the dry smile radiate out from it none the less. His suit was slightly purple and, out of place on it, he had two rather large boots that flared out at the bottom like snowshoes but not quite so large that they inhibited his walk. His shoulder-length hair flowed free and moved slightly in the breeze, but he conquered it with a swift motion and a hair-tye, bringing it up into a bunch behind his head and continuing the motion to draw two small swords from inside his jacket breast pockets. He's taking his sweet time, Oneon thought, when will those thugs be -

And of course then they were, Gumbo reached for his revolver inside his coat but Ron kicked him solidly in the face, swinging his body around for a full roundhouse impact. In the same move he stabbed towards Freeman who managed to knock the swords aside only to be met in the chest by his boot again. He went flying backwards as if connected to a bungie on his chest.



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"Some weather we're having, eh partner?" Ron said conversationally to Sam.

"Get out of here, ride down the building," she yelled at the brothers. Ron was already engaging Gumbo who, incredibly, had gotten back up and was swinging his meaty fists in fury which Ron numbly danced around.

"No," Oneon yelled but before he could stop him, Bourne was peeling out and heading down the toppled building's side with him at the back. He briefly considered leaping off as Sam had but instead begged his brother to stop the bike.

"I can't stop, it's too steep, hold on!"

They bounced over windows and weaved around drainage pipes, spinning solder windsheels (windwheels) and tipped over garden plants that had been on porches. Oneon imagined there were people inside, the residents, because this was obviously a residential building and one of the nicer ones considering it had a view off the walls into the wilds. A building such as this would have the overseers of the sector as well as its own little militia, guards keeping a look out of the city for intruders and snipers. Of course in the last dozen years there hadn't been much to look at and he surmised they had gotten lazy. A blaze of light fizzled past them and part of the brick outerwork exploded with a crackle. He heard yells and felt engines starting, Kops gathering, and soon a rain of bullets would tear through them and the building ahead. The top lay some stories distant, lost below the fog level, down at the ground where it met the western wilds. How had this building been toppled over instead of erupting into debris as so many of the others had? What fortuitous luck or was it? Would there suddenly be raiders ascending the building, was this part of some plan? The conspiracy took hold of his mind and he feared as much what he didn't yet see as ~~the~~ what he didn't yet hear behind him.

"Gah!" growled Bourne. "I can't see shit, and we're about to go through the rooftop garden, looks like a biodome." He bade his brother close his eyes, but Oneon had them glued open to the unseen ahead and besides the visor of his helmet would protect his eyes. He saw the bump, the bulge of the glass greenhouse ahead, and they were headed straight for it. There was no telling where else to go but forward and they were going far too fast to stop. The sides of the building disappeared into the fog, it was so thick, and they had only the runway ahead of them to rely on, the thin strip of building that Bourne used all his concentration to navigate. Oneon thought he saw figures in the fog, he thought they must be scared, or perhaps they were scouts for the raiders. He was afraid because he did not know what was ahead nor what was behind, he felt again that he was falling but which direction? The angle of the building was such that it could be pointed straight down for all he knew, the angry mist kept them from having any sense of direction up or down and his stomach lurched at the prospect that the building wasn't diagonal at all, but they were driving down the side of it, but then they were nearing the top. Were they driving UP a building? It gave him the feeling of those nightmares when a hill is much too steep but you are trying to get up it anyway and at any moment they would detach from the wall of their path, however they were stuck in the first place, and drop away to their doom.

CRASH! One moment it was ahead of them and then suddenly they were blasting through all the glass of the greenhouse topping the building. Branches, leaves, and all manner of greenery whipped and lashed at them speeding through, they were truly falling now, falling through a greenhouse, falling from dark cement jungle through real green jungle, the dichotomy of images and feelings disoriented Oneon to the degree that he found it almost beautiful and poetic ... a moment of fantastical hallucination in the eye of the hurricane of fear and mortal danger.



And then the plants disappeared. All that dark greenery that he knew to be green but could not see it in any detail. All the fruit that must be there, thriving above the dead stone of the city, above the giants buried up to their necks. All the fruit of their brains in their raging heads, their bodies yearning to burst forth and free them. Yet of this one they were riding down its head, they had crashed through its crown, and now they flew out into the void of its thoughts, cold and clear as the Autumn air. They were in the air, truly falling now and he felt himself rising off the bike, he felt a will in himself to save them from this madness, blank, black madness, and he gripped that handle deep inside and twisted and it seared the darkness, reared back, snarling ~~in~~ confronted by the bright light blazing from his right arm. It didn't feel like a cannon or a hand but he could neither see through its light. And then CRUNCH the bike hit the gravel, miraculously with both tires, and even more miraculously without blowing any shocks or literally busting their balls. Both of them heaved an audible sigh of relief, their transformed armor pinching their inflated chests uncomfortably and reminding them they were not yet out of danger.

"Aren't you going to ask how I did that?" Oneon asked Bourne who was now surveying their surroundings.

"No, and put that light out before we're seen." He drove them off the dirt and gravel of the buffer and up to the nearby woods. Oneon released the handle like unflexing a muscle and the light went out revealing again that smooth, alien machinery of his hand. He could FEEL it was his hand, but looking at it gave him an uncomfortable sense of foreignness and he was sure, by Bourne's most recent reaction, or rather non-reaction, that he knew about this somehow.

"Where are we going?" Oneon realized with dismay that Sam was the only one who knew where this fabled safehouse was and she had decided to be a hero, when they had ~~been~~ been left in her charge. Everyone trapped him and then abandoned him, you'd think he'd be used to it.

"Sam told me while you were daydreaming."

"I was not, and ~~how~~ how does that matter, we've

"I have." ~~A~~ silence, pondering. "And I know where to go."

"And now you trust her all of a sudden?"

"Yes." More silence, this was unbearable. Now they were making plans behind his back, not involving him in his own fate when it was HE that everyone was after and this magic arm that kept saving them. Yes, it was the arm saving ~~them~~ sometimes Oneon had felt that he was merely a puppeteer of this body. That a hand ~~had~~ had his head in a vice grip and his consciousness lay not in his head-body, or even his head, but in that disembodied hand holding him hostage and pulling his strings. Now he saw that it wasn't even his, but this other thing which covered his real consciousness and acted through the rest of his limbs but also its native arm. He felt weak again, no wonder no one had been impressed, they must know that it is not him doing it. Even his own power trapped him, and he could not have it, because it had him. He was everyone's slave puppet and he yearned to snap his strings and fall, fall limp, crumble and crumble into a heap, his heap, a free heap of flesh. Vaulting off that building he must have been saved by those invisible strings too and he was miserable at the thought.

Bourne kept to the edge of the woods, in frictionless mode, without lights on. He hoped for them to drive beyond the edge wilds into the farm zone to the south, quietly, without getting caught. He preferred speed but it would also be a good idea to save gas, he didn't know when or where he could refuel and also when they might need the edge up of combustion speed. The trees ~~ran~~ ran by as if marching lockstep in the opposite direction, their gnarled limbs and bare branches made them seem old, desperate, prisoners of their woods, the population of them—the forest for the trees.



It hadn't yet been a full century, but nature had wasted no time in letting her thoughts reclaim the landscape. The vegetation rushed in to fill the vacuum of vehicles and human traffic with alacrity that surprised even the most generous predictions. Conspiracy theorists claimed it was growth hormones or other chemicals that, lacking proper guardianship, had gotten into water supplies and fed the forests to bursting. More spiritual, hippy types, however danced with glee at the prospect of Mother Earth, Gaia, taking a healthy interest in her appearance and the road to recovery. This, they said, was proof of a consciousness beyond the pettiness of Peoples' arrogance. To think we could consider ourselves stewards of the planet, and not merely guests of it.

Oneon did not particularly like the company he was in, but he did relish in the possibility that they need never stop. They could just ride and ride into the cold night and leave this world behind, the state city that stared stupidly down at them from its shrinking cliff, the crazed mayors and useless sciences, the cults and couches, hot dogs and video games, and the endless conveniences, the cults then feel at home. But he had not felt at home and he did not feel like they were running away from home now. No, he felt anchorless and he hoped that they, no, he would never return. Without all that maybe he could be free and be himself and without the scrutiny of others he also wouldn't be trapped by them. And he could stop thinking of them, because they never thought of him anyway.

"Hello, friends," a voice said beside them and they were both startled, so much that Bourne nearly lost control of the bike. "Careful," the smooth voice said. "Now please stop and tell me where you're going." Oneon had barely a chance to turn and see the tall Asian man running easily beside them when Bourne shocked him by doing as instructed. Oneon gaped at him, starting with those oversized boots which had some sort of lights on the side resembling a meter, an amount, that was - if he was right about it - rather low.

"You're Ron, Sam's friend?" Oneon asked.  
 "Close enough," he nodded his head, slowly, almost like a bow without bending his back. "You're going the wrong way," he said to Bourne, putting extra emphasis on 'wrong'. Bourne started to object, but Ron overrode him: "Go to the safe house, I will show you where it is - follow me." with that he bounded off in another direction, and again Bourne did as told, but Oneon thought he heard him sigh.

"Yeah, you sure knew where to go alright," he scoffed to his brother.  
 "Shut up, like you're any help." Oooh that hurt and Oneon fumed again. At this rate he would exhaust himself out of a year of his life. He had not spent so much consecutive time with his nemesis since they were much younger, and back then he had enjoyed it, desired it, and cherished it... now it was all the opposite, complete torture. He hated him, he wanted to climb out of his sight, out of mind, and he was hungry too, he wanted another sandwich; this one he promised himself he would hold down, ~~but he felt~~

- "I'm hungry."
- "Me too."
- "How long until we eat?"
- "I don't know."
- "I thought you knew where it was, how far?"
- "Be quiet."
- "Why? ~~It~~ <sup>Quiet</sup> doesn't feed me."
- "Neither does bugging me."
- "Am I bugging you?"
- "Yes."

"Are we there yet?" He felt Bourne tense in anger and he smiled maliciously to himself. ~~At~~ They could make each other miserable, it didn't have to be a one-way street.



They were no longer skirting the trees, they were riding through them, following the easy-speaking man striding along in front of them. His boots emitted a fuss at each compression and lift-off of toes and heel. How long could he keep this up? It was rather comical and in a momentary high built of irritating his big brother he smiled, may have even laughed a little. The air was devoid of gray, the trees managed that sapphire blue... why did all colors become blue in the darkness? Was he too blue... Ita! Too blue. He knew he chuckled this time, insanity in the confrontation of their impossible plight and now off into the wooded wild with a devil in red appearing blue, a devil he thought he knew.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Everything. I don't know, it doesn't matter anyway. Whatever I think, nothing comes of it. Everyone has control except me, maybe even of me..."

Bourne turned back, Oneon saw the diagonal of his profile. A quizzical look or test up and he would take care of everything. No lights, but he thought he could see the virile, bare trees rushing over the curvature of his sunglasses, mouth obscured by shadows yet it must be a flat line, tugged at the edges in anticipation of sternness, of rules, of proper behavior for this insolent child in his care. Wait, in his care? Did this mean Bourne would be his guardian? No, he was too young as well, so... they were orphans now and some stranger might eventually foster them. He groaned thinking of his school life merging with his home life amongst the society of orphans in a house together. There would be no time alone, and more guards than just one, stupid, meddling brother. He shifted uncomfortably on the bike.

"We'll be there soon, little brother."

Leaves whistled by, whistled up, and whistled low but he could only hear them whistling in his mind for actually they just fluttered up, weak pigeons in vague attempts to escape and then caught in their wake, dragged, torn, lost, dying, and soon to be nothing but a blanket for soil that merged slowly in. Oneon felt it, he was detached from the branch, he had fallen, holes would soon show and he would begin to rot. Beautiful? Depressing? Was he depressed? He no longer felt like killing himself, but perhaps it was because he felt doomed, already on the path to death, and it aroused his curiosity. It promised a release from the trap that had been his entire life. Bourne's words were a comforting promise... "almost there." He didn't know where "there" was and that was just fine, as long as it was not back in that cemetery of a city, a graveyard of giants infested by human maggots.

"I know." To which Bourne turned again, lips pressed together in concernation. "Will there be sandwiches?" The lips trembled in a chuckle spontaneously.

"Sure."

A tall house loomed out of the blackness, snaked by vines and surprisingly not sagging though it popped out of the past, a picture from a history book. A broad porch with pillars supporting an upper-level, a window directly above those steps. There was a side portion topped by a round turret-like room and matching roof, the main section large and moderately sloped with tiles peaking out of the shingles. One of the upstairs windows was lit with a soft <sup>warm</sup> light. Although wrapped in vegetation, nature hugged it protectively, it did not drag it down. It was peculiar and certainly suspicious conspicuous, why hadn't it been demolished by raiders? They weren't that close to the city. Ron was entering some code into a panel beside the wrought-iron gate and they slowed to follow his strolling figure into the courtyard of the miniature mansion. Oneon thought it looked like a museum.

"This doesn't look very safe. What's keeping us safe here?" Oneon asked.

"Quiet, brother. It's fine."

"What? How would you know anyway?"

"Me." Ron said in his pleasant, moderated tone.

"What?"

"I'm keeping you safe here. Sam will be along shortly."

"This is her safe house?"

"No, but she'll figure it out."

"What!?"

"No, but she'll figure it out." Ron opened the front door which did so easily without any hint of creaking and stood aside, sweeping them in with a wide gesture.



"Wait, didn't you say you work for Hassan?"

"I do."

"How can you be partners with Sam if you work for a criminal?"

Ron smiled, a warm, patient, guileless smile and Oneon almost felt embarrassed for asking the question, but so many questions burned in his mind, burning stars in the blackness. His stomach grumbled insistently, his stomach burned too.

"Let's get something to eat, the kitchen is in here." He walked, legs rolling with his propulsion in a harmony that made Oneon think of dancers, or well-oiled machinery, yet it was not slick and sinuous, not dangerous in appearance. It was as disarming as his speech, but he knew from what he had seen that this mysterious man was capable of more than acting peaceful, much more. "Sam is mine to kill," he said and a chunk of ice slid into Oneon's belly but of course, that was only a sensation, a deafening ~~situat~~ sensation that would have made his ears ring if there were any sound to it.

"You're going to kill Sam?" He turned to Bourne, his own astonishment not a wall of surprise which notched his own up much higher.

"Yes. However, we were partners... a long time ago." He made a deep breath which may have been a sigh, opening another door leading to an opulent old fashioned kitchen. "And we still work together, often against her will, but we all get to make our own choices." He removed a pot off the stove which steam was already bursting out of. Oneon shook his head to clear the cobwebs, his hunger yearned towards the complex smell of stew, and watched with unhinged eagerness as Ron swept various vegetables, already chopped, into the pot, brushed his hands on his suit coat, turned a knob, added dashes from various shakers, then finally replacing the lid. "A few more minutes. It won't be soaked/marinated quite enough, but it's food and I hear you haven't eaten in too long." He took off his coat while speaking and they followed him out to a living room area where he hung it up on a rack. Bourne had tossed his jacket and helmet onto the couch after peeling off the mesh armor. He sat down heavily, running a hand through his short hair and then rubbing his face. Oneon just stood there.

"When are you going to kill her?"

"When she is ready to die, I will be the one to take her life." He sat down opposite of Bourne, crossing one leg over the other, and watching Oneon calmly. His heart must not even beat if he can be that still, but there was a measured rise and fall of his chest — he was not a zombie or a robot.

"And she's okay with this!?" Oneon wasn't sure if he cared, he knew he was hungry and in light of that, the meaning of other things diminished. Why did he care ~~at~~ what happened to a woman who practically kidnapped him?

"Not yet, but she is not ready."

Oneon laughed and Ron smiled softly, serenely, yes it was a serene look. "Who are you anyway, and why should we trust you?"

"~~For that~~ My name is Ron, I was told to gather you, and you have already chosen to trust me." His gaze did not waver, but it was not a harsh stare and it emboldened Oneon, encouraged him.

"Why me?"

"Why you, what?" It was gentle, unpretentious.

"You know what I mean. Why does everyone want to get me? Is it because of this?" He shook his fist in the air. "~~Why did~~ And why is my stupid brother so quiet all of a sudden?" He glared at his brother. "Are you afraid for my safety, isn't it past my bed time?"

"Sit down," Ron said and Oneon did, he wasn't sure why, definitely not because he was commanded, because he did not feel commanded. "It's been a long day, for every one and I will tell you what you need to know when you are ready."

"I'm ready! Tell me!"

"No, you're not. It's much too easy to intellectually grasp something and over-estimate our ~~own~~ readiness in any venture."

"Fortune favors the bold, right?"

Ron smiled widely. "True enough, but curiosity kills the cat."



"On for Peter's sake, well what can you tell me?"

"I will tell you that you ~~have~~ possess something that was stolen from William--"

"Brilliant deduction, Sherlock." Sam ~~snide~~ cut in. "Did Hassan come up with the notion or is that an original thought?" She sheathed her sword, armor shrinking back to individual oval plates as Ron held up a hand.

"Stolen from William by Lilee, his wife."

Bourne gasped, "William is my father?"

"Yes." Bourne's face was petrified into an expression of shock, his eyes became glassy and misted and a tear or two might have spilled over but he squeezed them shut and shook his head. He gulped. "Is that all?"

"No, but it is time to eat. ~~stay~~ Please, stay comfortable." He rose and walked into the kitchen, Sam stalking behind him speaking angrily. "This is your idea of a safe house? I should have known." "And you did." "Fuck you, Ron, what are you playing at for your master?" "My employer, you mean." Sounds of scraping utensils, food plopping, and ~~lots~~ rattling. Oneon's stomach sung in response, Bourne sat with his chin in his hands, staring comatose. "Why is Hassan interfering?" "I imagine thwarting William at any game is its own motivation." "You didn't ask why, did you?" "I never do." "How can you trust that maniac?" "Why should I trust him?"

They came back out and Ron handed the boys bowls but Bourne shook his head so he set it on the coffee table in front of him. Sam tossed gear on top of the pile growing on the couch and flopped in the chair beside Ron's which he reoccupied, tugging up his pant legs and sitting gracefully. Then he began to undo his boots with a series of latches and release buttons. Underneath were simple dress shoes and he rubbed his ~~ankles~~ ankles in obvious relief. "Awful things, those, but very helpful. Let me charge them before I forget."

"Stealing electricity now, Partner?"

"No, I took the house off the city grid, it has independent sources."

"What is this house?" Oneon asked between mouthfuls, soup running off his chin.

"This is an outpost we built near the end of the raids." Sam said.

"What do you mean the end of them?"

"Well, they happened a lot for a while and then a dozen years ago they just kinda stopped giving us the peace we have now. People forget how bad it was but the rumor of the wilds being dangerous stuck and so most stay in the city."

"Don't you keep your citizens from leaving?" Ron asked mildly.

"Anyone can apply for a visa, ~~the~~ jackass. Or just sneak out like a traitor." She raised an eyebrow at him. She wasn't glaring, it was almost a challenge, probably a look that had been delivered innumerable times before and still just as ineffective.

"But why a house and not a fort?"

"This is a honey pot, it's meant to look appealing to raiders," she explained.

"It's booby trapped?" His skin crawled at the thought of one wrong move setting in motion something to injure, kill, or worse—cage him.

"Quite." She laughed. "And I think it trapped some boobies. ~~oh~~ Damn, what a crazy fucking night." Ron chuckled. "You okay, kid." She looked pointedly at Bourne.

"Yeah, sure," he ~~said~~ <sup>mumbled</sup> but he wasn't, Oneon knew he wasn't, and they must have too.

"Please eat," Ron suggested, gesturing at the soup.

"I'm not hungry."

"Yes, you are and I'm not finished telling you what you're ready to hear."

"What do you mean?" Bourne alighted suspiciously.

Oneon thought it was indeed funny the situation they were in. It would appear from the outside, and indeed in his imagination that they were a family from older times or this was an atavistic ritual to create mimic one. Mother and father feeding their two boys. How would it be if these were his parents, had been his parents? Having two as well, and both available, both concerned for them, and even feeding them.

"Lilee is upstairs." This time it was Oneon who gasped.



V6 Bourne rose in a jerk, "Take us to her."

"Of course," Ron said also rising but making the younger man's movements seem extra childish. Oneon had prepared himself for her death but not her continued life. He was not only shocked but slightly annoyed and this disturbed him. He agreed with Sam's narrowing eyes although he did not know the thoughts behind them. She would not be annoyed with this woman's continued life for she had had no part of it all these years, instead she was evidence, an asset, a key, or a bargaining chip, or all of those things. Oneon wished Lilee was that for him as they headed up polished wood stairs that did not creak and were therefore that much creepier.

"You brought her?" Sam asked knowing the answer even as Ron gave a barely perceptible tip of the head, his hand running smoothly along the banister. "And why didn't she join us earlier?" But she knew this too even before he answered. Why is it we ask things that we know, is it that we fear silence more than a mystery, and knowing the truth in silence is still quite full of anxiety?

"She is injured and in shock, I left her to rest."

"Is she going to be okay?" Oneon asked, unsure of what he wanted to hear, or perhaps what he needed to hear.

"Yes, just a bit bumped up." He carefully opened a door off the upstairs hallway which had paintings on the walls and even intervals, pleasant depictions of gardens, country visages, and flowers. A plush carpet lined the floor and there were small tables topped by vases and small collections of books, small statues, and other knick knacks. Honey, cozy, and utterly out of place in the middle of wild woods out beyond the perimeter of safety. Safety, ha! This was a safe house, it seemed anything but, and Oneon had to remind himself that that was its purpose — to appear easy to take and thereby take aggressors by their own blinding, arrogant greed. How strange to appear here wanting nothing, to escape the world, and have a vision of atavistic perfection delivered on a silver platter with awkward news.

There she was, lying in a queen-sized bed surrounded by comforters, her breathing jagged, black hair plastered to her forehead in cold sweat. Lilee was pretty in youth and becoming handsome <sup>in</sup> middle age. Although she was no longer thin, she was not fat either, it would feel wrong to call her chubby either — she filled her frame with graceful curves softened by weight, accentuating it, rather than exposing it as she had as a girl. Her nose ended with a slightly bulbous tip and a drop hung suspended from it over her full, down-turned lips from which the traffic of air and oxygen made its commute. There were bruises on her pale brown cheeks, and one eye may have been blackened, or blackened by makeup. Maybe she had been working, maybe partying. She did both with unflinching intensity, she tortured herself with ceaseless activity, activity with the exception of parenting which she had avoided as the plague, perhaps the avoidance indicated her love and guilt of it. Why had she not told them who their father was? She was lying in bed but she had been lying to them all along, because hiding the truth is a poor semantic excuse for a brave lie. Oneon wished she had lied more, had given them sweet sadness in some brilliant tall tale about a man they would never meet. And now they had met him, he had tried to kill her, and he was as passionately evil directly ~~as~~ as she had been unintentionally awful to them. Which was worse, he wondered, to be strongly or weakly evil — is the result the same.

Neither brother talked, they stood at opposite sides of the bed looking down ~~at~~ at their sleeping mother, their goddess as children, and both bore expressions of disapproval. Bourne's ~~asked~~ "why?" with brows furrowed, eyes watering, and mouth turned down as a mirror of her own. Oneon's ~~and~~ stated ~~with~~ disgust, mouth tugged at the corners, eyes narrowed from the bottom, nose flared, her nose an aim. They both bore her marks and both marked her with their gazes, painting red on her.



Sam and Ron stood in the doorway. Their expressions were both ... gentle sadness. Maybe they couldn't feel the same betrayal, but they could understand it. Sam had children of her own and it broke her heart to imagine them giving her this look as she slept, as she lay wounded, vulnerable. And Ron, he felt it too, but Oneon could not figure out how. His eyes darted between them and his facial muscles relaxed in these thoughts, in this curiosity. He then noticed their hands were touching, lightly holding one another's, but they did not look at each other, they only kept looking ahead, at him, at his brother, at his mother, and he knew the silence could not last indefinitely and he didn't want it too, it was beginning to make him angry.

"Is there anything to eat besides stew?" Bourne's face blanked and refreshed to irritation, frowning at Oneon. He did not understand how his brother could be irritated any more by this than their mother's mere existence and the large, unanswered question of their own, but he did not care - he was glad he could make him feel it. He needed to, deserved to, his caretaker had led him here, it was his fault and he had stopped fighting it, as if Bourne knew, as if he was part of this weird group. Only the presence of Lilee had surprised him and now ~~Oneon~~ Oneon doubted that was authentic as well.

Sam was about to say something, probably not very nice, but Ron held up his hand, the one that had been holding hers, to forestall her as he spoke, "Not unless you wish to cook it. Aren't there things you wish to ask?"

"She's sleeping."

"She can be woken." Sam looked at him sharply. He shrugged.

"I don't care what she has to say."

"Oneon... use your inside voice..." Lilee mumbled, shifting in her blankets, their stirring sounds seemed so loud in the silence, snakes sliding over one another, rubbing scales. Oneon stomped out of the room, squeezing between the strange love birds; what was their deal anyway and why did they care? He didn't. He found some bread in the kitchen. It was not sliced and he did not bother to find a knife. He did not even bother to pull it apart, take a piece, he grabbed the whole loaf, as yet untouched, and tore a strip all down the length of one side. He went to put it in his mouth and he saw the hand feeding it to him. Dark gray like pencil lead with spidery black lines at joints, pitch black, shadow that he didn't live in, that he lived from. Did it matter if he washed this hand or not before eating? He was not hungry anyway and he let his arm drop, he could feel the bread between his thumb and fingers, he could feel it as anything he had ever touched. Who had put this in him? It was all he had ever known and also never known he had. Would things have been better if he knew earlier?

He began to pull the sleeves of his sweatshirt up his forearm. How far did this mechanical monstrosity go? He had a sudden horrible thought of it infesting his entire body, his entire being, and stopped. Was he a robot? Would a robot question his being a robot? Scientists, this second generation, the producers of the future and the conveniences of the present, they were making great strides in artificial intelligence, possibly artificial life. They were making great strides cobbled together wreck an experiment in a new master race? Ridiculous, never seen, so smooth, so alien. Was he? Ugh, an alien robot? Ridiculous! And this was technology like he'd of course, new hardware fabrication had ground to a halt as the focus switched from consumer electronics to survival so almost all new ~~new~~ devices were modern software running on century-old circuitry. Silicon never dies. He continued, starting again, to pull up his sweatshirt, part the middle of his forearm, solid metal a galaxy of mild shimmer as tears on asphalt, exposing the fake muscle, towards his elbow, when does it end?, ...



THUMP! He sprang up, his heart a marching band, his own breathing ragged, did he smell something burning? It was too warm in here and his palm was sweaty... his palm. He had dropped the bread, he spread his hands and stared at his palms. Both of them were damp. He ran the fingers of his left over the palm of his right, tracing the lines and feeling the moisture. What would a palm reader say of his life? What is this black magic?

"You alright, kid?" Sam's voice behind him.

"He's going to kill you, you know."

She sighed, "That's not news to me."

"But why is he going to, why does he say that and then help us?"

"It's hard to say, if he's helping us, he does what Hassan tells him, but ~~he~~ if he hasn't harmed you yet then he's not going to. ~~Some~~ <sup>Your</sup> brother knows him."

"What?" He turned around. "How?"

"I don't know, but it's obvious. I'd wager he got some of that tech from Hassan, although he seems more righteous than criminal. One thing at a time... your family has been watched for a while, maybe because of you, maybe because of William or rather Lee's involvement with him. How old are you?"

"12... 13, today is my birthday, if it's after midnight that is."

"It is. So, coincidentally William started his meteoric career climb a dozen years ago too, and the raids ceased almost completely, and you were born."

she looked at him meaningfully. "I don't understand, did William make this?" He flexed his fingers, splaying them. "Perhaps, or Hassan. He kept tabs on your mom, Ron saved her in the nick of time. He loves playing the hero."

"Why don't you just ask Ron then."

"Don't you care to know too?"

"Not really." He stood defiantly.

"Right," she said, ~~she~~ drawing out the word with Australian accent. "Well, I want you to talk to your mother anyway. I gather you guys don't have the happiest family, but she is family, and she knows more than you whether you care or not."

"No."

"Oh yes. Only I get to say 'no'."

"And I love it when you do, it sounds so charming in your accent." Ron was on the stairs, smiling. He continued down, precisely, softly. "There's a sound you put at the end, the ghost of another letter. Do you know what a pirate's favorite letter is?"

"R?" Sam ventured, raising an eyebrow.

"Ah you'd think it'd be 'r', but nah... it's the 'c'." She laughed despite herself and he was standing very close to her. Oren fought a smile.

"Idiot," Sam said but it did not sound insulting. Oren felt embarrassed in their combined presence and he wanted to leave it. Ron gave him his out.

"Your mother is asking for you and I would like to speak to the samurai alone." He hurried upstairs, past them, as if they repelled him, and he heard Sam say, "The Ronin is always alone." before he blotted them out with the solid bedroom door. ~~That~~ He was thankful for the impeccable construction keeping ~~out~~ out sound, he didn't want to hear the innumerable construction to hear manifested affection, he didn't want to hear them any more, he didn't want one another, the slight popping sounds it makes as lips disengage and smack in pleasure and repeat, the sucking, oh it sucks, it sucked to hear, to imagine, to know....



"She was asking for me?" Oneon ventured. Bourne was now sitting with his head in his hands, a pose transposed from earlier. He had discovered his father's identity and his mother's involvement in ~~cover~~ covering it up and now he confronted it by shielding himself from it as he had so often tried to shield Oneon.

"No, well maybe, she mumbled something about her son ... could have been either of us." Bourne did not appear to have gained anything else nor anything else to give. His expression was bland, confused, and utterly unconcerned. Oneon's recent embarrassment and fear over who he was evaporated, burned in rekindled irritation. Bourne saw his face change from unsettled to settled into a hateful stare for both of them. Lilee. Her hair had been swept from her face, dabbed of moisture, she appeared healthier, at peace even and Oneon hated her for it.

"Well, let's wake her up and find out," he said harshly.

"She's sleeping, we should get some sleep ourselves," Bourne said absently.

"Why should we? Why should she? I want to know."

"Now? You didn't before."

"I want to know because you do it."

"We know who our father is, I... I'm still thinking about that..."

"I can see that, but it doesn't matter."

"It doesn't matter?" Bourne flushed with feeling, hands dropped to slap the chair, he was not very close to the bed, his face contorted. "Doesn't matter? It's all that's mattered to me, and I don't understand why it doesn't matter to you."

"How does it change things? Our father is trying to KILL us, that's the only how!"

"And you want to know why? Go ask Rex."

"No, I'm going to ask mom," Oneon advanced to the bed. "I don't understand how you can let her get away with this, just lay there sleeping peacefully after all the hell she put us through. And now it's precious father's turn, but at least he's considerate, at least he's just trying to put us out of our misery!"

"Oh, your life is so terrible. All we want is to keep you safe and—"

"I don't want to be kept safe, I don't want to be safe, ~~and~~ I definitely don't want you of all people to do it. Aren't we safe enough now, brother? Isn't your job done? Isn't this gun big enough?" His hand was a cannon and he held it up between them. "I've NEVER needed you, but you just wouldn't leave me alone."

"Alone? All you ever whine about is feeling alone."

"Shut up!"

"You sit up there on those old buildings and sulk about how no one cares—"

"I said shut up!"

"You want Nicky? Why didn't you just go for her then? You expect everyone to chase you down all while telling them not to. You ARE alone!"

A ripple of sparkling lines like lightning rattled and crackled through Oneon and he raised his fist in a rage, withering, uncaring, just wanting to shut this stupid boy up, his big idiot brother who didn't know anything and acted like he knew everything, this golden child that everyone liked better and couldn't possibly understand what the taste of his shadow did to him, the poison, the disease of his presence, ever present, looming and leaning and playing and always telling him what to do, when, and where to go. And he could go to Hell. Oneon saw red, he stepped into alternate time and it did nothing to soothe the fountain of raw anger that would burst from him in a fury, a river of hot molten blood. Bourne flinched, unconsciously raising his right arm to protect himself, and this appeared as a ripple, a slow motion action that reminded Oneon of the twitch of a rabbit, of prey, of mere encouragement for the predator and he pulled all his will to the room, himself, turning that handle within, tightening it with electric pressure and everything crackled with terrible possibilities.

"Boys?" A weak, pitiful, but sultry voice peeped up into the tension and it popped as a soap bubble pops, as a baby falls asleep, as a child finds satisfaction after a long cry, and immediately they were both by the bed, at her side, craving her attention, approval, and a warm explanation that would make all these demons fragments of their imagination. The gravity and lure of a mother on starving spawn.



"If you two are going to yell, please don't do it in my bedroom."

They both fell into giggling sobs, all the walls of their fortresses were paper to her razor throne. She did not know what they were going on about, she had her eyes closed, yawning languidly, and must've assumed recovery from a bender.

"Don't you two have homework? Oh, I'm sure, I don't remember coming home, I may have overdid it, I..." her eyes popped open and sucked in the odd old, now room, its impeccable cherry wood colors, pleasant paintings, and artfully arranged decor. She grimaced trying to sit up but fell back down with a groan. "Oh no... oh, I, what happened?" They were not any help, tears stained their cheeks, Bourne swallowed his relieved sorrow but Oneon let it flow. "I remember an office building, everything sliding, papers everywhere and I remember thinking that's a lot of paper. Where was it all kept before it was fluttering around like confetti. I lost my balance, I heard a lot of breaking glass and noise that I guess was the screaming of the building itself breaking. Not enough people were screaming or it was drowned out in the other sounds and I could run, it was uphill. There was nothing I could do." She stopped, shut her eyes and breathed as the horror passed freshly through her in a shudder. "Nothing I could do. All these people scrambling and bleeding and clawing at one another. We were rats in a collapsing maze and even the skyline was crumbling, I thought it must be the end. The end of everything. There were more CRACK BOOMS as we rode the demolition of this one." She opened her eyes, they each had one of her hands, she looked at them and their hands. She looked at her right hand, Oneon's right hand, and her eyes got very wide, her mouth too, and Oneon jerked his head back self-consciously. When he pulled his eyes back to her face she was staring at him.

"This is the end," she said tonelessly without removing her gaze, it bore into him as one who watches a spider in fear and fascination... and threat. It was not a motherly gaze and it was nowhere near comforting. She seemed to come to and the hypnotic look was broken but the coldness remained. "And how is my boy?" she asked him. Bourne was shocked and Oneon felt he had been stabbed in the gut, fresh tears flowed soundlessly, but his stomach thrrobbed in abandonment, fierce loss. He clenched his fists, jaw, staring unbelievably at the side of her pretty face. He had always told himself he was not her favorite, but to have it so demonstrated... he felt devastated.

"Mother!" He choked and she turned back with a look of pity... and fear?

"I'll go get Ron," Bourne said quickly, rising, wiping his cheeks, and hurrying out.

"Ron, but who is Ron?" Lilee asked, swiveling her head to follow his movements, but he did not slow his step and in the space of that one ineffective sentence he was gone, the door was shut, and they were alone. Together. Oneon wished Bourne had stayed and he bet she had to. She continued watching the door for an uncomfortable second, before repeating the question.

"He... he is the man who saved you."

"Ah, of course, that pretty fellow..." she said absently.

"Mom, what's going on?"

"Hmm?"

"William our dad, he-"

She hissed. "William! Is he here too?"

"No, no, you're safe, but is it true?"

"Is what true?" Her voice was dead, distracted, her eyes flitted about in distraction and she chewed on her lip. "It's all happening, really happening..."

"Is he my father?" He yelled and she fixed ~~us~~ him with large brown eyes, vacant, elsewhere clarifying and pinning him down. He didn't even care of the answer, he already knew the answer, he realized he already trusted Ron exactly as the man had suggested, but he wanted something from Lilee, anything from Lilee, and his dejection was rebalancing back to anger. A clock ticked somewhere, a grandfather clock, by the sounds of it and something he had never heard in real life. So time, their time, in this dimension, moved one uncomfortable, excruciating second further into the linear future from a past that now seemed pointless, scrambled, incomplete. He felt in this moment a hunger that had nothing to do with sandwiches.



1/7 He was hungry to know and conquer and not be the pitied victim that his brother pegged him as. His brother who had abandoned him to be alone with the witch they both shared as a common enemy but who loved him best. He even accepted that decision by leaving, showing that the only way Oneon could receive anything was by his absence. And this is how it had been all throughout his life and he felt finally this hunger and he was armed, literally, with a way to change himself, to be more, and to take what had never been given to him. Another tick and tock and Lee would take this answer from her if he had to do so by—

"He is not your father."

"What —, but I, Ron said that..." all went to pieces and he reeled, she must be lying. She had always been lying, why would this make any difference—

"I am not your mother."

The floor gave way and he was falling. He hated all these people, but they had been anchors and now he found in an instant they weren't even his to hate, because ~~the~~ he had never been theirs to love or mistreat or... he truly had no one he was —

"You are NO ONE," she breathed what appeared to be a self-satisfied sigh of relief and Oneon felt a corresponding fury mount within himself. NO ONE, but that...! "That's how I named you, I know it seems silly but—"

"No" he said in a razor white line of focused rage in searing cold, a calm that speaks of massive violence and she lost her words.

"God!" she gasped, eyes bulging, gaping at this arm, his arm, no one's arm. It was no longer an arm, it was a gleaming cannon, shimmering with indescribable power, at the side of a boy just turned a teenager, standing, legs apart, pressed to his thigh, his eyes screwed up, and his mind a turmoil and she was laughing at him, inside. She had made fun of him, made fun of the name she had labeled him, marked him for life, for the dozen years of mistreatment she then treated him too, and now she was making light of it? Silly?

Her mouth worked but no sound came out. He was not surprised, but she was and the horror he had seen before in her remembering blossomed anew, freshly spreading over her face, taking the place of healthy color, and sapping the soft light from the room. The waves of it, anger or something, yes, that potential, power, and he drank from this fountain within him, gave himself over to the feast on it and relished in the passionate hatred that ballooned. An orphan, taken ~~in~~ to be forgotten, given a secret, hidden in him, assumed to always be weak, kept "safe" by a brother. A brother! He didn't even have a brother, he had no family at all, whatsoever. No allegiance, no loyalty, and a short life built solely on betrayal and lies. And they blamed him for whining as they took everything and gave him nothing? No brother, no mother, not even a mad scientist father. They all were either lying or trying to kill him for inexplicable reasons. Someone had to pay, he was tired of paying, he—

"I wish I'd never..." Lilee was wracked with sobs. "Onyx." Onyx? "I wish I'd never taken you! I wish I'd never taken it! I ruined everything!" I'm sorry so sorry I regret, ... I ... " she was not talking to him, the selfish woman, this pretty woman whom he had considered his mother, was regretting her life but apologizing to no one, not to him, not even to the NO ONE who stood before her. It made him sick and he could not stand it any more, he felt as if the room was vibrating, that he had stepped out of time, and he wanted to leave the world burning behind him but this would be a start and he stepped forward. Each footfall resounded, a gong booming in his mind, a death knell in her ear, and he knew he would take what she had never given him, and she knew she would lose her life to a loser.



Was any of this real or a mere dream or a nightmare, the mere night you cannot break free from. The inevitability of subconscious on a track to fulfill itself what must be done and he was falling with it, he had not yet fallen completely, and the adrenaline of the decent peaked in terminal velocity. Was this to be a memory then too? Would he relive this moment indefinitely in infinite shades of meaning and moods and regret it until the end of days? There was nothing else, there wasn't even these thoughts, yet, they existed only as propensities, more inevitability, more things out of his control, passing him by and waiting for him down there at the bottom. Cold thoughts to keep one warm in isolation, because loneliness has no temperature, it takes its bearings from our circumstances. He was not sure what happened but sure that he wanted it to.

Lilee, his mother, not his womb or sense of security, but a representation of a mother over time, in ~~an~~ nurture not nature, giving him all the attention, all he deserved, all he wanted, sending him the gift of dread. Her dread was bottomless, a well of it that ran impossibly deep, and he drew from it almost gratefully, it gave him an awful, awesome sense of control, of power, not over his destiny, or all of the world, but over her, her life that she had spent chaining him to her absence, wasting his life and hating him for it, him! An innocent she had chewed up, leaving him a weak and worthless childhood, nothing to show, and set against by everyone. It must be her fault, it had to be. It had to be someone's fault.

Maybe three seconds had passed, everything comes in threes after all, and in the new intervening time her mouth began to close and that sorrowful, pitiful, weak look began compressing into a dark smirk, springing from a lightness of rebounded doom. The room ceased vibrating, the pulsing filling his ears and his skull ceased with it, and his heart began to beat, throb throb throb, it started the first throb, an upper contraction and his left arm ached, he wanted to scratch it, to cry, but the flow was an aquifer no more connected to his eyes than his heart, his blood, seething, steaming, cooling and her look grew colder, chiding! There was the instant, the photograph of time to be forever mangled, that no one would see but him, no one. She was rescinding her regret, she was blaming him, his weakness, ~~and~~ that was not her own.

FLASH! Brilliant white light, blinding, not brilliant but stupid and witless, sharp but full of dullness and it sung in silence followed by a thundering ripple, a bassy trembling and tearing, and Oneon felt dissolved by it. He may have been yelling, a word, he didn't know what it was, but it stretched to fill this moment, this reset, and it didn't repeat, as nothing ever repeats exactly. There was gravel in his jaw and a pang of pressure in his forehead and he had tapped the reservoir, he was weeping. He sat in a heap in the corner, his face in his right hand, as if this was his true mother's bosom, and he cried into it, but it bore him only echoes of his tears, reflections of his sadness, and a slope to send those streams down his forearm, into his sweatshirt.

She was dead. He had killed her. And yet this was not mourning for the corpse or the person that once lay there, preparing to sneer, regretting life but never begging for it. Oneon did not cry for Lilee, he cried for himself, for the weeping, the pitiful, the weak, the murderer. He mourned his loss of innocence, the melancholy bliss of his ignorance, the silly comfort in being overlooked and alone. Ending it all would have retained that, enshrined it, and martyred him. Instead he cast himself further into the cruel existence, felt more naked and more alone than ever. The floor had fallen out and he had gone over the side, overboard, past boredom and now smashed into the base, the solid rock riverbed, and left no way out. He cried, exhausted, trapped, snarling and sniveling, and praying for the world to just destroy him instead of continually abandoning him to his own idiotic decisions.

Through the blur, the curtain of rain, she lay slumped against the headboard, a beautiful latina doll. She was regal, she looked soft and supple as ever, the bruises and scrapes hidden by the night, all lights were out and her skin glowed magnificently, healthy, in the moonlight. She was peaceful. He had given her peace and only added to his torment. There is no one to punish, when the punishers are the punished. Her eyes were closed.



A motorcycle roared to life shattering the serene scene, the wake in the turbulence of emotions now spent. Oneon sniffed, coughed slightly, and exhaled long and slow. If nothing mattered now... where was Bourne going? He had seen the flash, heard something, and feared his own demise. He was running. His older brother, the prototypical shield brother, was fleeing ~~the~~ the orphan runt, renouncing his protection, and going where? There was only one thing Oneon still wanted, at least to see one last time, and Bourne must know this too... Nicky. He stood up, unsteady at first but pulled himself together in the act. He was free, alone but free, finally his brother would not, no, could not drag him home ever again. He had severed all ties, he could climb the highest building unobserved and fall, for real, if he wished. Yet now, now he may survive. ~~he~~ He examined his arm, as he turned to open the door, turned his back on the dead, turned away from her final rest, and he would never see her again. He wondered if he would care.

He put his hand on the door knob and thought he saw a glimmer, a flicker of light on it. He removed it and looked at ~~his~~ his palm but it came from below. He ~~no~~ looked down, past it, and saw himself wearing Ron's boots. He must have put them on earlier without realizing and lifting his legs, he felt them giving him an easy strength in spite of the weight they added. He knew he could run in them. He had seen Ron run in them...

And where were those two? Planning how to take him no doubt, even though he admitted that neither seemed the kind to delay. No matter, this was not the way out, but, he paused. His helmet and that funny armor... yes, it would be worth the risk if, wait, what was he intending to do? He had no plan but he acted as if he did. He was letting his fate drive him, that clawlike hand gripping his head, controlling his body. Yet what he had just done he knew came from within and not above, he had some capability to control himself after all, demonstrated by what seemed to be a complete lack of control. He put his hand back on the door knob. He turned it. No one ~~was~~ turned it for him. He pulled it open, it creaked and wobbled and he saw scorch marks, but he stepped through. Oneon left the room and entered the hallway.

The house was dark. The revving engine suddenly ripped and tore at the ambience. He heard it chew fitfully on gravel and speed off. His brother was driving away from him, leaving him, but he would soon catch up. Would he? Why would he chase the one person he had so longed to be free from? Yes, it was his decision, and he would. He would pin him, trap him, and he did not know what else. Follow and learn, maybe, but he thought he didn't care that much to know anymore. He was an orphan with a secret stolen weapon, what else was there to know, what would it matter. He felt he could sleep for a century, but he also felt electrified and drawn to follow his brother. His brother? ~~at~~ Bourne. That arrogant teenager that pretended so well, pretended to smother him with safety, ha! That was not his brother... did he have any brothers?

Smells of stew. No clothes on the couch except his own. He stretched the armor over his body, carefully positioning it and it seemed to ~~grow~~ expand, trying to cover, protect, inject. It made it difficult to put on and when it was, ~~the~~ it wasted no time in sheathing him completely. He felt tired, but powerful. An exhaustion of mental, not physical, sources. He put his motorcycle helmet on his head and looked at his right hand. He willed it to transform into a cannon. The handle had become innate. This was part of him and no one would take it away. He would not go back to being weak.

The arm cannon twisted into formation, his fingers split and spun in a circle as his wrist expanded with the end of his forearm to become the barrel. A flower, a deadly torch, his, him. It glowed softly as he peered inside and the inwards were lost in the hazy cyan light. He mesmerized himself, turned it over and around to trace its perfection, his perfection in the reflected light.



"Damn, looking sharp, kid." Sam leaned against the doorway frame of the kitchen, arms crossed, full armored garb, two pistols at her hip, and the Sun Blade across her back. She was not smiling. He turned towards her, pivoting and back peddling slowly to the door as he spoke.

"I'm leaving."

"I can see that."

"Don't try to stop me," he raised his arm threateningly.

"I don't think I could," she shook her head, blinked. "I don't think you can stop Yourself either."

"My name is No ONE! She named me No ONE!" He grit his teeth and bared them against the feeling of anguish that brought to him.

"You are Oneon, she didn't know she was giving you a good name."

"It's a stupid name!" But he didn't think it was, it was his, one thing good he HAD been given. He shook his head, side to side, "Don't try anything, you can't trap me here!" She only looked at him, not smiling... sadly? Why should she be sad for him?

"I have to let you go," she said. "But please don't kill him too."

"kill who?"

"Your father."

"~~My father~~ is NOT my father! I don't ~~have~~ <sup>HAVE</sup> any family!" He had reached the door, he spun and sprinted out into the midnight moonlight. His steps felt fresh and springy, like running on loam, and the earth turned under him as a carpet pulled quickly by a magician that he kept up with. Sounds of KSHH and OOSH reverberated liquidly from his ankles and in ~~no~~ time at all he passed the wrought iron gate. It was closed so he instinctively jumped over it and quite nearly ~~seared~~ <sup>scared</sup> through the crisp air, leaving a trail of steam in exhale, and then he hit the ground and rolled. It felt good, moving, so fast, he felt alive. His senses made him feel alive. Isn't it strange how we associate our actions with the quality of the life we live, but we tie the raw sense of BEING alive to our senses? And he felt very alive, he could forget all he had done or would ever do. He could put it into perspective, stuff into sweat, and tread its surfaces. He only needed to move towards one goal held loosely, and everything would unravel as the ground did before him. Each light step, smashing that ground, was putting the past behind him and drawing the future closer. It was the path, the journey, and this was climbing the wall laid on its side, and he was no longer falling — he was flying.

Where was he going? Where had Bourne gone? He made a leap up onto a nearby tree, wide low branches that he navigated easily to gain a view, but it was dark. However, the gas engine was not quiet, not like the new frictionless ones and he set aside the ringing in his ears from that distant, man-made thunder. He took off his helmet, calmed his heaving chest, and closed his eyes. Bourne was not on the same road, he was to the south east, heading towards the southern farmlands, but why? That noise would make him noticeable, but he was obviously going for speed. He would be easier to spot on the cross-roads when the worker crews grew bored and shot anything unexpected if they weren't on vacation in the city. Oneon shot out of the tree in one massive jump and swept his eyes over the landscape to the southeast where the wilds ended and man's conquest of the earth began. Sure enough, he was pretty sure he could see a dust cloud where Bourne's bike raised it. He headed ~~the~~ towards it.

Farm work was hard but lucrative. Everyone must eat and we love variety, so the survivors, the citizens of Core City, paid well for food. However, there were limitations to the land, to the area that could be protected and yet out beyond the city walls. People were afraid of the lawlessness and did not want the peasants they paid so well to sully their city. And so ~~for~~ farms, cooperating with Kops and the government, formed their own militias, their own somewhat more dangerous societies, and many workers kept on until retirement.



Oneon watched Boune in his mind, the exhaust trail reminiscent of the trail of fog his own breath left behind him, at the safe house, beyond sight, facing away. He left safety behind and pushed beyond the fog, his goal was clear, though he did not fully recognize the intentions pushing him towards it. He wasn't sure what he was going to do or why he was following his foster brother, but neither were these in his thoughts either. He enjoyed the rhythmic pumping of his legs, propelling him speedily, now through trees and brush, over logs, and bursting through stouter bushes. The wilds were truly wild with nature grabbing and grasping at every opportunity, every empty space. He had never been outside the city but he had seen the same effect on man's concrete walls as he saw here where all was unbounded. It found every crack and valuable vacuum and filled it with vegetation. It pushed aside its own rotten corpses, of wood or eventually of soil, organic material. The result is always the same, he thought.

He broke through ivy and blackberry, brown and angry in the fall as he flew and blew through them, past them, tearing feebly at his armor, helmet, boots, scratching impetuously at man's triumph: metal and silicon, virtualized, synthesized nature, but if man could supercede nature, wasn't he just a part of it in another way? If all beings and all things went in some kind of circle then maybe man's was just too large to see, that his equilibrium with the rest of the planet has simply not reached its crest, perhaps the circles edges touched or intersected in ways that were beyond comprehension. In any case nature had won this battle and it was anyone's guess where man sat in the war. Given a siege of the arc of our species, nature would have to do nothing except plan for the moment of our demise. Nature brought all the bounty and we only take, even if it is for charity, and no one can fault us for offering it to our progeny. Not our progeny anyway.

Oneon had never been among the trees in the absence of stone constructions, he had never been out of the city. It felt good, it felt right, and it soothed his mind even as it surged in his muscles, seethed with exertion. Stems brushed him, stickers, dead leaves, dead fronds, and he imagined lush jungle, and imagined it waving him along, pointing in the correct direction. He did not feel alone, he felt almost drunk on the sense of communion, or perhaps he was only high on the lack of sleep. Really, he was willing to admit either.

Lovely tendrils, an endless dream, he wanted to lie down amongst the lushness, in the truth of his transgressions and have it sapped away, sucked into the earth, and returned into something beautiful, blooming, blossoming. Flowers are the waste of plants, their final desperation for furtherness, reaching out and having something reach back, beckoning to be more, beckoning to bees. Yet the root is the source and the root remains behind, for a time, it cannot watch, it withers in spite of whatever the successes of the flowers are. Unloved, necessary, it births and dies in isolation, gripping mother earth to the bitter end, buoyed in her bosom, leaving the fruits to her breast and taking the endless path within, without funerals, and without any want of it. Oneon wished to be the flower, he wanted to be known and loved for what they could witness was his power and beauty. So he did not lay down, amongst the weeds, he did not let himself be absorbed, he kept onwards, pumping his limbs, sure of his target, and sure that his goal was righteous.

It smelled cold, he couldn't see his breath, everything was moving too fast and because he wasn't thinking about it, it was moving even faster. In the quickness of such moments there is an endless bending and stretching, then the snap comes in an instant and the long plains of preceding time are but a shelf. They may as well not have happened at all, for the beginning is drawn up, flush to the end and thus he shot out into a browned field, expanding into the moonlight, and it was as if he just left the house even though he knew it was miles away.



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Normally, there would be sentries, cameras, patrols, lookouts and every manner of guard to protect the invaluable, the tasty, the necessity — sustenance. Hydroponics could supply a lot of nourishment but millions of people still required more and the farms provided that, and more. Besides staple crops the farmers grew things they knew would fetch a high market price so they expanded beyond their city contracts to the amount they knew they could protect. And in the last dozen years raids had been light so there had been a boom and security was thinner across the massive fields, but none of that mattered because it was well into fall and nothing would be growing anyway, even pumpkins had already been harvested, so for the collectives it was a time of vacation and extremely lax security. If Barne could ride a loud motorcycle without notice, then one man, one boy, one alien thing, sprinting would cause no alarm whatsoever.

Dirt crunched miserably, craked absently with each footfall. Clods crushed by heavy heel, no dust rose. It was the kind of cold that expanded the earth even as it froze it, everything was a light, frozen castle and Oneon was crushing them. He had this vision that he was a giant freed from his tomb, his grave site of being buried up to the neck, and he was nesting everything, flattening it to reset positions, to where it could all start over from a flat land. He did not want to seem light, he wanted to have weight and effect, he wanted to use this momentum of newly discovered power to create craters, to be noticed, and no one would assume it was his brother. He would be an independent act, no associations, and whether of fear or love, they would single him out. And no one would know his name, no one would know what it meant. No one would know that he was NO ONE. Oneon, how he hated and loved his name, but for reasons he could not explain. He wanted to give it away and keep it close to his heart, a secret until his death, drag that blessed cursed name down to the grave and bury it with his death, his grave, that dirt, oh the final culmination of his fall would bring such comfort — but not yet!

Only now he was beginning to reenter his thoughts from the animal passion of the hunt. Probably the barren dirt flying by, hovering as he was, had a large influence on this or it was mere coincidence and the right amount of time had passed, and all these moments up until now had passed through his subconscious leading him to the current one, these three seconds or so that we call the present, when his presence shifted into conscious thought of his plight, this flight, and the possible sibling rivalry coming to a head, that he was bringing forcefully to a head while the other half ran, trying to avoid it, knowing for the first time that he was the weaker one and Oneon the stronger. For he felt strong in this armor, with this cannon, in these boots, and under this helmet. He felt like some sort of superhero chasing a villain, and he desired to prove it, to crush that renegade, to take all his childhood disappointments and the brother whom he had loved and...

He faltered. Loved? He tripped and windmilled his arms to stable himself, flipping awkwardly but remaining aloof, on his feet, face unsullied by dirt but touched by surprise. What was he doing? Nevermind what he had done, but what was he doing now? Who was he anymore?

You can smell the frost and hear the mist. When it is cold and silent enough, it doesn't matter what you see or feel because the absent senses take over. It is so cold he did not feel it, he smelled it. It was so quiet even the ringing in his ears faded, and he could hear it. Not in his breath, that was a traitor to the silence, no the ground of silence lay in the haziness that enveloped the moon and he didn't have to listen closely, it spoke clearly. Hazy.



The moon did not stop Oneon, it is only a reflection. That haziness which bloats the moon beyond her waistline is of our own distorted intreflection, the light from our sun behind the horizon, under the butt of the earth and far enough off to be ignored. And it is easy enough to disregard a signal wholesale for we would much rather hear of the reward than of the terms or concessions. ~~Oneon~~ Oneon restarted his run, the distant noise of Bourne's fancy motor overriding his brief realizations, quickly stuffed down, not forgotten, squelched under his own fancy boots on the frosty ground. One could forget anything in these moments, running, crunching, satisfying steps and imagining nothing, punishing no one, and having no reason for his trek, his target, and no clue to his purpose. Ignorance is bliss and the motion it makes is happy madness.

~~CRASH!~~ All that ground covered came to rest and there was no more time to think, he didn't even know which direction Bourne was going or which one he had come from but he knocked him solidly off the bike and it went skidding down the road, spitting fumes and dying, as a dragon held underwater. He struggled to his feet as Bourne rolled sideways, somehow gracefully, and arose holding a pistol pointed at him, he was breathing heavily, they both were, and it was not from exertion. Bourne's nose flared but his mouth was closed, jaw set, and his brows drawn together in consternation. He did not look surprised.

"Mother?" He asked tightly.

"Sleeping," Oneon said, he had his right arm raised, barrel pointed outward, stance wide, red and blue, scarf still in the wind, Night shades on, cold, quiet, the most difficult confrontation is done in isolation, without distraction.

"Will she wake up?"

"No."

Bourne's jaw muscles worked but he kept his eyes open, trained on Oneon. Had he ever held a gun? He held it with such confidence as he did everything he did and Oneon was hit again by a sense of betrayal at pretending that had nothing to do with their childish games, acting as Kops, killing each other in play acting. The protector of his youth now held a gun to it, to him.

"You didn't have to."

"I know."

"We only wanted to keep you -"

"Safe? You wanted to keep me! I never wanted to be kept!"

All the words exhibited volcano clouds of steam from the magma of their feelings, bubbling, crushing, molten, on fire. Oneon didn't want to think clearly. He didn't want his actions to be cleared. He didn't want to be cheered up or somehow let off the hook, made innocent through clarity, pity, or anything this man, this boy, his brother could offer. He wanted to revel in his sin, he felt its dark seed withering within him and he had a passionate desire to fulfill all its biddings.

"We didn't," Bourne stopped. "I never wanted this, wanted to hurt you."

"Hurt me? How could you hurt me? I am more powerful than you, I am beyond hurting! You should have never tried to trap me! You should have never given me this!"

"I didn't! I -"

"You're innocent? I don't believe you."

"I'm not, this is so much to take in, but I knew - some..."

"What!?, What do you know?"

"That you were special, that I had to take care of you."

Oneon could not think of anything to say to that. He was special? What did that mean? Obviously Bourne had ~~been~~ not known. "Where are you going, why are you running?" he asked finally.



"I'm not running," he said and there was a pause, he seemed to be deliberating what to say yet was about to elaborate. Oneon was sure of it, and he wanted to hear this, hear the excuse or reason as he might call it. He waited for the answer, not patiently but he waited all the same. The stillness invaded, palpable and demanding, as uncomfortable as the cold chill turning their sweat from temperature moderating to freezing. Their limbs shivered uncontrollably, gun and cannon shaking, and yet only seconds passed. Bourne had decided he opened his mouth, assuming a grave look, as cold as their freezing sweat and had Oneon's agitation not been so hot it might have made him shiver too.

"Well? Tell me, brother," he lingered sarcastically on the word, unable to remove the caustic flavor of his delivery. He wanted everything to burn, everything to hurt, he wanted the blue of his outfit to bruise, and the red of Bourne's to bleed him. He wanted payment in pain for all the misery he'd been squashed under and released into.

"This will be—this is a war. And you are a key in it. I must be ready and there are things I need to arm myself with."

"My arm isn't enough? YOUR arm now isn't enough?"

"I don't know about your arm, this Onyx, but mine is not—no."

"The hero," mocked Oneon. "Fleeing to a weapon, to use against me?"

"You don't understand..."

"Why did you leave when I," he choked. "When I killed her?"

"Would it have changed anything if I had it? Maybe I'd be dead too."

"So you were afraid of me?"

"Aren't you afraid of yourself? How do you explain any of this?"

"No one will explain it to me!" And he clenched, his namesake causing him renewed agony to hear. Bourne caught it.

"What did ~~she~~ tell you?" It pained Bourne to ask it, knowing she was dead.

"She said I was not my mom, she said I was NO ONE! That's not news to me, I've been invisible my entire life and you've been protecting a ghost. You who can do no wrong, who has a mother, a father, who is not NO ONE!"

"No! Don't say that! It isn't true and you've known it, you've always known it!"

"Why would I have shielded you, watched you, told you stories all this time?"

"It has been a long time since you told me stories, now you just tell me what to do."

"I have to, I have to protect you, you're my brother, you're special..."

"No no no, STOP saying that, stop lying to me. Why should I believe you?"

All was the color of rust batted in moonlight blue and the squeal of rusty metal broke that blue silence, the tension exploded as old hinges screamed their rotations off and caps of dirt opened, manholes with men in them, and deep, harsh voices rang out from them, preceding the men themselves. "HALT! DO NOT MOVE!" The militia, the hibernating bear, had awoken and they did not arrest. They had their own law, driven by profit and security, and those taken by it were either released or... something else; there existed no rules, no books to proclaim exact punishment. Then again, they had never come up against these two or anything like them.

Oneon turned, but they were behind him and he turned back to see more behind Bourne who had done the same thing. Both armors up and helmets on, steam clouds once large and puffing now dimmed to thin lines of breath, mouths closing in thin lines of lips, eyes narrowing in thin slits. He surprised himself by nodding, passing a signal to his nemesis, his hated enemy, who responded in turn. His mood felt that red, his brother wore his mood, did his blue match his brother's it was an odd thought, of colors and moods and what we display on the outside versus what we feel on the inside, reflections of one another, who is the moon and who is the sun, etc. but it was interrupted by a gruff man speaking as his crew had finished spilling out of the secret passageways beneath the Fields. They wore strange yellow hard hats that reminded with attached lights and they would have been completely blinding if they weren't also pointed at each other. Oneon was reminded of miners from history and their garb was as rough as an idealic rendering, but it was also clean—they were well-paid for this work of protection.



"You are trespassing and unless you can produce papers, we are within our rights to confiscate—" he waved a free hand over their visages "—all this shiny junk."

"We are on official business," Bourne said tersely, but the man was behind him.

"Son, you are too young and I am too old—bullshit." He didn't have a twang to his accent, but Oneon would have felt it appropriate if he had. "Now lower those pea shooters, before you hurt yourselves, place your hands behind your backs."

"No." Oneon spoke up, his voice cracked but he was dead serious. "No," he said again before the man could speak again. The gruff gentleman handled his shotgun with both hands now, cocking it and lowering it on Oneon as he ~~said~~ spoke.

"This aint no game, I'm not going to ask again." A sea of guns laking, loading, pointing. "I don't care what sort of high tech shit that armor is, wait stand a—"

"Leave us, get out of here," Oneon's steady voice continued. Bourne was trying to subtly shake his head, but Oneon was tilting his forward, assent not dissent. He received a deep, rumbling chuckle in return and titters of the rest of the group. Oneon reached within and laid an abstract palm on the handle he knew would be there. The air sucked in slightly on itself, everyone felt an inexplicable pull or push, like ears about to pop but not having to in the first place. The man's face grew grim and unpleasant, losing any aspect of a fair and just dispenser of outcity laws. He tightened his shoulders and growled his words.

"Don't you threaten me, boy. Now drop those weapons and—"

"You first."

"See here you insolent little bastard, there is no way—"

"Yes, there is. Now I won't ask again." (but no one could see this beneath the night shades)

"Please go," Bourne said, his eyes slightly wild. He had experienced some taste of Oneon's capabilities earlier but he sensed they were growing as he learned how to focus them and there seemed to be no telling what could happen next. Little flecks of light appeared, fiery tears in the fabric of night, and drifted meanderingly into Oneon's arm, a ripple of crackling energy washed over him. He was pulling faster than intended, that light palm was now a gripping fist, and filling him equally was a rage at being interrupted by idiotic innocents who could not tell how not to meddle, how to stay safe, ignorant, alive. He wanted to teach them and shove all those demeaning words back down that rugged, arrogant throat.

The man put the tip of the shotgun to the back of Bourne's head, his helmet clicked as it touched and he started to raise his hands in acquiescence. Oneon's heart skipped a beat, it squeezed strangely in his chest. "That's better, now you." Oneon breathed out, lowering his arms, "Go" he whispered to Bourne, and closed his eyes, inhaling, feeling what he was about to do, the handles of it pulled taut. "GO, RUN!" He yelled as he raised his head to the sky.

"What in the hell do you—"

"FIRE!" And all the guns went off. There were CRACK BOOMS and yelps of surprise, gruff and average alike. All the barrels burst in the hands of the militia, exploding sparks and twisted metal in their faces. All the guns except Bourne's. "GET GOING!"

"Brother—"

"Leave ME!" Oneon's eyes alighted in a terrible fire when he opened them and Bourne staggered on his approach, turn, and rushed to his bike. The men groaned and struggled to right themselves, rubbing at their eyes, dropping their guns, and shaking their heads. A couple tried pursuing Bourne but he dispatched them with some swift blows from his arm and made it to his vehicle.

Oneon smashed his cannon into the gruff man's gut and he doubled over in pain. "I told you," he said but he was grabbed from behind and lifted up as fists beat into his body, the soft parts between armor plates and his head. "Oneon!" he heard Bourne yelling. Far from being disoriented by it, the beating gave him a kinetic inspired aggression and as he kicked and socked his way free, he yelled back "I don't want you here!" A mass of bodies lept onto him, piling on, pining him to the ground.



"Keep ~~that~~ that little bastard down," a muffled but familiar gruff voice yelled. He must be calling for backup, gathering weapons, or figuring out how to trap him. Oneon didn't care what it was, he wouldn't stay here long. He felt hands trying to grab his wrists, probably to cuff them, but they found none on his right arm and he grinned savagely. He did not feel trapped, weak, or useless... he felt quite strong. But why had he let Bourne go? "Someone call ahead and have that motorcycle stopped."

"He's turning towards the city," another voice said.  
"See if we can't stop him before he gets there. Two is better than one."

Wire was wrapped around his arms and they were drawn behind his back. The weights lifted, the sweaty men and hard hats got off the pile, believing him properly subdued and he was roughly hauled to his feet. He let his limbs loll carelessly. He didn't think they could do anything to him, and if they could the more power to them. He chuckled at the thought of power, a mean chuckle, and let his fingers flex on his right hand.

"I don't know what you're grinning like an idiot about. We're going to get your friend and all you achieved is making me angry."

"He's not my friend," Oneon said and then added after a thought "and no you won't."  
"We won't what?"  
"You won't catch him," Oneon sighed as though explaining this simple matter exhausted him.

"You're a ripe little bastard, we'll have to teach you some manners," and he struck Oneon across the jaw, his hair flung about, already released from his helmet and he turned back to the man with an angry, defiant look. "Oh, I see you want the extended lesson plan!" And he lay into him, pausing only to wipe the sweat out of his red eyes, eyes burned by the explosion of his shotgun. Oneon fell to the ground spitting blood, coughing, wheezing, but he did not lose consciousness, chucking his head into the frozen turf that held him in a crunchy bowl of frosted soil.

"I'm worthy more than all of you. Best just let me go before you get hurt."  
"Are you threatening us again, son?"  
"Well you saw what happened last time."

"Yeah, your coward friend left you to die alone. ~~Gay~~ Gay this little bastard!" A filthy cloth, the taste of dirt and sweat filled Oneon's mouth, was tied to him, bound, and they tugged at his armor but it was firmly lodged, it would take his flesh before they could take it off and they saw this too. Their men shot questioning looks at their leader who shrugged, "let him keep it. Come on, I'm freezing my nuts off up here and my eyes fucking hurt. God damn little bastards."

He was tossed down one of the open hatches and fell a dozen feet onto a metal platform with a clang and an unintentional grunt. His helmet hit him soon after and he saw this tunnel widened below the surface. The ladder continued down through a hole in the floor and the floor itself bobbed slightly as men jumped or climbed down onto it. Finally the last man closed and secured the hatch. They were all sheepishly adjusting their helmets, clothes - fur-lined winter coats and tall, thick boots. Some were shaking their heads, others staring dumbly at their ruined weapons, turning them over and over, around and around, hoping they would reveal the secret to repair or at least what had happened. One by one they clicked the lights on on their helmets. Another man ~~peeped~~ walked over to a wheel and chain pulley system and began turning it, and the platform moved down. It was uncomfortably quiet, they did not speak, and Oneon had the satisfying impression that they had ~~not~~ expected an easy take, now they wondered if he was worth all the damage he had caused.

"I suppose you're rather proud of yourself, wrecking our property on our land," Oneon hacked up a bloody loopy. "You're practically bandits."  
"Actually we protect AGAINST bandits."  
"I know."



"Oh?"

"I know what you're supposed to be, but everyone knows you just rob people."

"You mean, take payment from trespassers?"

"We were just passing through, you should have let us go."

"That's trespassing and, son, neither of you were moving. Fact is, you were about to start shooting each other. I can't have that on our farm."

"No we weren't and you're saying that never happens?"

"Not for a long while, maybe."

"A dozen years?" Oneon sighed.

"Yes, that's right. Raids stopped rather suddenly, suspicious if you ask me."

A cave had come into view with many tunnels filled with rails and a simple, flat railcar off the edge of the platform which sat on the edge of a railway. There was loud clinking and locking sounds as it came to rest at the floor.

"What are all these tunnels?"

"What do you think," the man held an amused expression, massaging his temple. He continued when Oneon did not answer, "we use them to transport crops, equipment, and all manner of things without being seen from the surface."

"Because of bandits?"

"Exactly, ~~and~~ however it's been a while since we used them. It's been just as simple to use frictionless trucks at the surface, easier maybe, since there haven't been any attacks."

"Why are you telling me?"

"Why did you ask?"

"I didn't, I mean, why are you talking to me?"

"Why do you think we're enemies?"

"You tried to rob us!"

"Oh, son," he tried to chuckle but stopped, squinty in a surge of pain and then fixing Oneon with a frown. They were on a railcar now, he did not know which direction they were facing or how they even knew to face the right direction, was it completely random? "You're in a lot of trouble."

"You have no idea."

"What did you mean about your worth, who are you?"

"I'm no one," he grimaced, would it get easier to say? "Who are you?"

"My name is Dick."

"Is that short for Richard?"

"It's not short for ANYTHING," he gave a wry smile.

"Oneon."

"Pardon?"

"My name is Oneon."

"That is a fine name, son. A sight better than Dick... stupid registries."

Oneon smiled down at his feet. It may have been that his parents had loved the name, or there was a Richard somewhere in their line, but many also just got fed up being denied due to duplicate records and took the first one off a list provided. An expired name could be reused only after the previous bearer had been dead for a year. Having a registered name meant that Dick was a Core City citizen. "Why do you like my name?" he asked, embarrassed to want to know.

"Paperwork." Oneon's face fell. "Just joking, my boy, a bad habit. You have to have a sense of humor in a world like this."

"It's peace time and most have as much as they want."

"Awful isn't it? And no one knows what ~~he~~ the hell they want, especially how much is enough. I fear we are rotting wood jammed into a swamp." he trailed off. "But then there was that demolition tonight, a terrorist attack we're told, and you appear with that other fellow, dressed like god damn futuristic angels ready for holy fire."

"Holy? Angels... like... God." Outside of the curse, it was a dirty word on its own, implying stupidity and backwardness and Oneon had the sudden uncomfortable thought, replacing that brief sense of solidarity, that he was indeed captured by a redneck named Dick.



"Where are you taking me?" Oneon asked.

"Well, I know nothing about you, son," but there's a bulletin out for you, or someone who matches your description."

"My description," he felt cold, wary.

"Kid with a gun where a hand should be, some sort of dangerous hostage, but I didn't see no Australian woman with you. I can see why they said you were dangerous."

"I am dangerous."

"Yep, especially to yourself I imagine." Oneon did not know what to say to that, sure this thing on his arm ~~could~~ could kill, but it was easy enough not to turn it on himself, and it was rather hard to drop or misfire too. He'd have to lose his arm, and he still did not know how far it went into his body. He did not relish the thought of being gored and losing his arm, having his one good gift taken from him. He didn't put it there, he didn't steal it, but it wasn't his even though he had lived his whole life with it. Happy Birthday, he thought to himself cynically, but we're just gonna have to take that present back.

"You're planning to escape, aren't you?" Dick asked, looking at him pointedly. Some of the men groaned.

"Easy enough to get around you in this hallway." Someone said and several laughed. "Can it, Rosco," Dick said but it was an automatic gesture and he was thankful for cutting the tension, the image of more damage, of being injured more terribly when this had seemed so banal to begin with.

"I don't need to plan," Oneon said quietly.

"Oh? Relying on pure brawn then? I'd hate to have to kill you."

"I'm not worried about that."

"No, it's true, we lost your lust for life when that other boy got away."

"He doesn't matter."

"Yet you could have hurt us if you weren't concerned about his safety."

"Not concerned," Oneon said angrily.

"Sure, son." Dick laid a hand on his back, paternally. This and other gestures had been more parenting than Oneon felt he had ever experienced in his entire life. "Just don't try anything yet, we might be able to help you."

"I don't need anyone's help."

"No one can do everything alone."

"Yes, that's right." Oneon laughed bitterly. Dick gave him a frowning, questioning look but he did not elaborate so he went on, turning back to face the tunnel ahead fading off into the darkness, and moving through it ~~then~~ excruciatingly slow. Oneon waited to run but now he did not know where he would go. He told himself he was just waiting until they got somewhere he recognized before leaving. He wouldn't promise them anything, give them anything, including himself. No one would give them nothing. But Dick had continued talking and Oneon had not heard any of it until "William". "What?" he said, slamming all other doors in his mind shut.

"I was saying William put out the order which is unusual. I don't think I've ever seen him give commands, where are the other mayors? Anyway, just weird, and you fit right into that category."

"Like a weird Dick," Rosco chimed in to appreciative chuckles.

"Geez that never gets old," Dick sighed and rolled his eyes to an "old dick" addition.

"All the mayors are probably dead."

"Say what? How do you know this, not - you?"

Another bitter laugh, "No, I saw William shoot the president mayor myself."

"Why didn't anyone stop him?"

"I wasn't in the same room," Oneon said.

"You would have?"

"Maybe," he thought No, not then, but now, for sure. The thought of killing this madman gave him inspiration and he thought it had an irony too yet that eluded him. A poetic justice? He was never good at English, he gave up trying to make a pattern of it in his mind, or an excuse, a reason. Hero? Justice? No, he wanted to keep his arm and he could tell William would stop at nothing to get it. Why?



"You sure about this, how do I know what you're saying is true?"

"I don't need to lie, I don't care if you believe me."

"Because you're just going to force your way out of our company?"

Oneon shrugged, maintaining his angry, angsty visage.

"Let's just kill him before he thrashes you again,"

Rosco, ~~you~~ you want to kill an unarmed child?"

"I'm not a child!"

"See, and haven't boys abused dicks long enough?"

"Lord help me; please quiet down, Rosco. Oneon is not going to hurt you again."

"He's not? I mean—he caught us by surprise before..."

"I'm not?"

"He's a very surprising, I doubt that will be his last, but no. Oneon promise me you won't try to escape."

"Why?"

"I will let you go."

"What?" There were more what's, angry as shocked and Oneon wondered if there would be a mutiny. He told himself he didn't care either way. "You'll just let me go?"

"Dick, seriously, what the fuck?"

"I don't need any hospital bills or damn wakes either."

"But he's a wanted criminal and you're abating/aiding him."

"Is he? This situation is too weird for me to seriously believe that and they don't know we have him."

"Uh..."

"Rosco..." Dick gave him a menacing look, "They don't know, right?"

"I called ahead to have the other boy stopped and I figured we had at least one in the bag... also, I sorta wanted backup in case he did try anything."

"You crappy bastard, Rosco. Why don't you lead if you're going to make all these decisions? You know how I operate!"

"Yeah, lots of chit chat. You're one talkative dick."

"I promise not to harm any of you," Oneon chimed in and then stopped to stare, he was standing now, arms at his side, wire broken at his feet. "Now give me my helmet." ... "Please." Dick gestured to have it and it was given reluctantly. They all eyed him with apprehension. During the conversation he had let his armor ~~unwind~~ unwind and he re-activated it as he brushed the hair from his face and tightened the helmet on his head. Why did he care what happened to them? What was he doing? "You should get ready for a fight," he heard himself say.

"Why and with what? You blew up our fucking guns," Rosco complained. Oneon did not think he was funny any more. Whining and desperation were so ugly.

"William blew up a whole sector and killed the president. If you're not on his side, I don't think he's recruiting. I don't care what you do." Then as an afterthought, "Just don't get in my way." And he spun his canon to life, laying a casual grasp on his handle, and drawing just enough to be ready. It ~~was~~ was so mindless now, automatic, easy and he had only used it a handful of — ha, handful. He felt momentarily and irrationally angry that he would never have a right hand, a human one, and that this stolen gift, this Onyx, would be the crutch everyone assumed he used. He pushed the thought aside and a new one popped up, Bourne had said Onyx but he was not in the room with Lilee when she named it. How had he known? Did Ron interrogate her, did she tell Bourne secrets, or did he already know. He knew more than he would say and that irritated Oneon, he should not have let him go.

"What the fuck is that?" Rosco said and Oneon looked amongst the men scrambling to find something on the halted barge; the walls of these rail passages were barren of anything usable. Just rails and tunnels heading all over... even into the city!

"It's my crossbow," Dick was saying defensively.

"What, you don't like guns?"

"I like my crossbow."

"Fucking archaic, I hope the kid is wrong or we're in for it." He was sweating and rubbing his bloodshot eyes. "We should just get the fuck out of here."

"And go where—"

"Dick," Oneon said. "Which way goes into the city?"



Time may have sped up or slowed down, but he dared not overthink running on the ties of the track lest he trip or worse. And so he allowed to let his thoughts wander. This was not where he had expected to be, or how he expected to get here, just a little while ago. He was happy he had not killed them. Yes, happy, and that meant he was not a coldblooded murderer. He liked that. He just did what he had to, except for her... that, well why did it even matter? They've hit rock bottom, that they no longer care about their life, and find ~~even~~ still be protective of life in general. Life ~~is~~ was a sacred thing that even at ~~his~~ damndest ~~was~~ ~~he~~ was thankful for, in a way, and did not want to cheat anyone of theirs... as he had been cheated, or would be cheated if they caught him and cut him up. Did he... did he not want to die then? Yes, he wanted to live and for that he could not run, he could not hide, or how many others would die unintentionally because of him. People, people like beautiful Nicky. He had to save her. And the idea thrilled him, he let it thrill him, he loved having a thrill, a purpose, and now a way.



Then he saw two points of light, or maybe more, it was hard to tell but he knew they were coming his way, he wasn't just rushing towards them. And they weren't silent, he thought he heard a buzzing too that initially started as a higher pitch pressure in his ears, the kind of piercing hiss we hear in silence only magnified. And he knew this was it, a new battle lay ahead, and probably not the only one even in these tunnels. Maybe he would have been surprised to not see the flashing lights of Kops, but too many surprises had already happened. What was one more? How was he not numb to all this craziness? Well, there would be time enough to mull later...

Soon he would be seen and then he was, but he himself was blinded by two sparkler like orbs of sparks and some figure in between, holding them to the rails, that rushed by him in a squeal of metal on metal and a reverberating crackle of electricity. Jets of sparks exploded further but he passed them by, they were braking, and he ran past them, above them, the tunnel had become a pipe and in the darkness ~~of~~ of it all he found himself no longer constrained to gravity, the floor, and he was glad for it took him a split second for his eyes to adjust and that thing to come to a screeching halt. He dove to the ground, rolling over the tracks and then popping up, charging his arm cannon and turning to face the sparking rail car. Only it wasn't a car and there were no Kops aboard that he could see.

"I'll make this s-s-simple," the form said, sparking orbs dimming, <sup>slightly</sup> rising off the tracks and two ~~harshly~~ angled eyes, or visors for eyes, appearing as Oneon's eyes adjusted. They rose and rose, turning down from a good seven feet to point at his five foot form and the ominous voice, electrified, sizzling, like a voice forced through an electric fence, vibrating something that might have been vocal cords, continued: "Hold s-s-still."

THAT was its command? Oneon stepped back, widening his stance, holding his ~~right~~ right arm behind him as it glowed a furiously bright blue so as not to blind him and he could make out the singular, giant form before him. It resembled a ~~person~~ fused with a preying mantis, arms were strange blades that had been set on the tracks and they dripped sparks like liquid, spurting from somewhere under a circuitry-like exoskeleton. There were rail wheels at the things knees, bend forward ~~unnaturally~~ inhumanly, as an insects. Sparks dripped down those awful blades which now stretched out, coming down towards his shoulders, more quickly than he had imagined by how it had ~~the~~ languidly risen and from such a distance! Those awful inhuman, spiked arms covered the distance between them in an instant and he stepped back only just in time and swinging his ~~arm~~ forearm to fire from under his shoulder.

"Ahhh!" It said, electrically serene. "S-s-see you have POWER!" And the arm, the blade he had hit at point blank range, retracted with the other but glowed liquidly as gasoline in a puddle and shimmered, points of light rushing from the epicenter along a myriad of lines in that strange circuitry, illuminating the figure and then disappearing. Shadows returning except those eyes and Oneon's arm had quieted its own light, it had gone nearly out and he suddenly felt exhausted. He pulled on the internal handle, yanking at it, straining angrily and becoming panicked in the microsecond before the thing came at him.

Herky jerky, it came in awful, nightmarish movements, bending its limbs and joints fiercely fast and was upon him, a fly under a massive spider. He dodged as it struck out again and again, he tumbled and rolled, anxiety growing, tears forming, acting solely on instinct, impulse, the only things keeping him alive. Those blades struck the rails, the walls, and very nearly him, each time a fountain of sparks erupted and he heard their buzzing hiss loudly in his brain. These aren't sounds that sound external, they pass as poltergeists beyond the ear drum and haunted him from the inside, turning upside down the furniture of his house, and keeping him from finding equilibrium. And all the while he heard it saying, "Ahh!" and "Still, sit still!" with the s-s all magnified and stretched on an electric current. It was confusing, disquieting, but somehow his body with those wonderful boots were able to keep him literally one step ahead, ~~not~~ even to running up the side, and then yes! He felt a warmth that was not warmth in his hand and as it he topped the thing, above it, he let him self fall, righting himself in the drop, and firing at the back of its head.



CRCHSSSS! A great shower of sparks ensued and the bass of the blast shook the rails, bringing dust up from the gravel and dust off the ceiling, too. He landed with a crunch, feeling a bit better but still tired, drawing again on his will to fulfill another blast, a finishing blow, as the thing stumbled forward away from him, falling down to one "knee" of a sort, and holding itself up with one arm, stabbing its blade forward into the ground. He heard crackling like a campfire, popping and snapping, was it wheezing? No, he realized with horror, as it stood up again, drawing out the blade it had used as an anchor with a steely hiss — it was laughing.

"sth-sth-ha-sth-ha-ha," standing, it rotated rather than turned, moving in that disquieting, disjointed ~~man~~ mechanical manner. "S-S-see?" It stretched to its full height, towering above Oneon, who wore a mask of grim defiance, but sweat trickled down his face from the exertion of the acrobatics and inside he quivered in fear. All his power simply fed it! And now he was having even more difficulty bringing more to bear. Did he need to recharge? How? Was he running empty something that only to bear. Did he need to begin with? Suddenly he felt very alone, afraid, and he decided he would have to run, but which direction. He did not even remember, in the heat of battle, which way he had been going.

He fell backwards. He meant to turn and run, but he fell. His boot stuck in the space between ties or something, and he toppled clumsily backwards, to the side, to the ground, and STAB! Stabbing pain, no time had elapsed, he was pinned by a giant blade sticking into him. He cried out, screamed, it didn't matter. ~~The~~ Alien prongs appeared at the wrist of the blade and latched around him and he felt himself lifted, jerkily, painfully off the ground. He tried to draw power but his cannon was a hand grasping uselessly drawn to his sides, and instead he drew an uncomfortable shock through himself, stiffening his body, stifling his scream, and stinging the wound. A blade in him, he knew it but could not see or feel it. Nerves do not exist on the inside and he was thankful or it would have been debilitating, but what did it matter? He was dead or worse than dead. First, though, he was turned to face it.

"S-sh-shocking," it said. "S-S-so pitiful, S-S-so valuable."

"What are you?" he strained to say.

"S-S-SiGrid. Sigrid," it said and laughed. "S-S-silly boy."

"You-you're a woman?"

"Is-s-s. Was-s-s. So-s-s-somewhat. Now, give ~~me~~ Onyx-s-s." she demanded.

"Fuck you!" He screamed as he felt the blade twisted, he wriggled against it and his right arm came loose.

"Tsk-s-tsk-s," it chastised him. "Mussst I cut it from you? Which one, hmmm?"

The other blade was there poking at his chest around his shoulder blades lungs, probing reflectively but not breaking the skin, tapping his armor curiously. "Candy s-s-shell," it chuckled. "Perhaps-s-s-s, whole?" It mused, turning him from side to side, he squirmed and screamed. "Nois-s-sy." She seemed unhappy about that.

His mind floated on the surface of consciousness, a loose tooth in a sea of gunny blood, he felt faint but angry. Angry at this thing, grid insect, SiGrid, whatever it was.

"What?" It paused.

"Whatever, you big ass bug," he spat defiantly, ~~letting~~ letting himself be filled by his rage, enjoying the consciousness it returned to him. "Ugly, fat fucking bug," he figured that was something Sam would've smiled at. Sam, she let him go, to die here? Is this karma for killing a awful woman, what kind of justice was that? Was the war to be over so soon? He would not be a hostage, he would not be trapped again, he wanted that feeling of freedom when he was running outside, he wanted fresh air, he still wanted the world. He wanted to come back up. He felt his head filled with red, with blood and rage and he clenched his teeth, flexed his hands and ~~refixed~~ fixed a full glare on ~~that~~ his captor, not for long. He imagined tearing her limbs off, like a poor tiny insect, an ant, and squashing her beneath his... boots!

"Ins-s-solent child!" The hiss was mad, a mad hiss, he could practically feel the electric spittle hitting his face, and it squeezed him, he exhaled painfully but did not scream. In that moment, it flexing, he kicked the arm holding him, imagining running, and the boots



reacted, his foot flying like a cannon ball. He hit a joint, felt a spasm, and a sickening slide as he fell off the blade onto the ground. "Augh! S-s-stupid!" It yelled drawing up <sup>its</sup> injured arm in a new show of sparks. He rolled sideways as the other one came down to nab him and squirmed to his feet, left hand on the hole... the, no, it was gone. The armor was doing its best to patch him and he felt a numbness in the area he hoped was drugs being administered. The pain faded and he was a bit dizzy but determined. The other blade came down like a guillotine but he was ready, he grabbed it with his right hand, touching his own blood with his own metal hand, and felt a mild shock course through him but this time he did not resist.

Instead he pulled, he pulled on his will, he willed the pull, using the current as a new handle and his hand morphed into a cannon as Sigrid screeched and her eyes dimmed and he saw those points of light coming out of the lines of her circuitry, into him. A shimmer passed over him, a wash of strength, a wave of hope, and a surge by which to express his anger but—

CRUNCH! "Ah-ss-see-augh!" It retracted its arms and jerked backwards, using them, ~~the~~ instinctively, to cover the eye which now had a rod of metal protruding from it. Some dark liquid sprayed out, instead of sparks, and it continued backing away. Sounds of pings and ricochets as bullets sprayed at it echoed around him, gun powder and friction sparks erupting in small blasts, driving it back in a mortal confusion.

"Fuck, what the hell is that big bastard," he heard a familiar gruff voice say. Lights appeared, running over the figure, criss-crossing the insect-like giant as the militia approached. It skidded backwards, turned, herky jerky and hissing, and skidded off into the dark, two balls of sparks ~~the~~ shooting off down the tunnel.

Oreon breathed a sigh of relief and dropped ~~to~~ his head, put his hands on his knees to calm himself, and felt the numbness patch in his torso as if he could feel a large tumor within. Was he dying? There was time for that later. A hand on his shoulder.

"You alright, son?"

He nodded, looking up at Dick. "I had this under control," he smiled weakly.

"Sure, I know, ~~but~~ But I just wanted to try out this damn crossbow."

"Dick shoots — and scores!"

"Thanks for that, Rosco. Wonderful Jesus."

Oreon got up and cleared his throat. Was that blood he tasted? "Now do you believe me? He asked the dozen lights all pointing at him, squinting. Rosco managed to look uncomfortable, shifting his weight awkwardly.

"Hey, we could've taken that thing," he said, hefting a gun that had been quickly repaired and probably wouldn't last more than a shot or two more, if it had any so far — Oreon had not seen who did the shooting.

"This is not good," Dick said, ignoring Rosco. "What is William up to?"

"I'm going to find out — and stop him."

"Why?"

"I have to anyway. Either I go to him or he comes to me."

"And you want to decide."

"Yeah," but Oreon did not know what he was deciding, he was flying blind. "Can you help me get into the city?"

"I will, but most of ~~the~~ these guys need to get back, organize, re-arm." He waved his crossbow expressively. "We need more than sticks and stones against robots."

"I don't think she was a robot."

"She?"

"It called itself Sigrid, it had personality — a gross one, but — ~~not~~ like, a personality."

"Huh," Dick looked pensive. "Artificial Life?"

"That's illegal," but Oreon felt silly for saying the obvious. Dick nodded, understanding.

"Maybe... this is not good," he said again and laughed abruptly. "And I'm the one stuck in a damn loop."



"Whatever, she was mean." Oneon wanted to change the subject and get going. He still felt bad down here and not just from the wound. There was a stifling claustrophobia that made him feel weak even after letting his hand return and sensing that power dissipate within. Was he sick? Using up his life with this thing? What was it connected to? "So can you help me get into the city."

"Sure, Rosco and I and a couple others will accompany—"

"Fuck that, did you see that thing?"

"Don't be Dick-less, Rosco." A burly man said grinning, stepping up next to then Rosco glared at him. "Oh so only you get to make Dick jokes? You like that Dick all to your self?" Oneon didn't think this was going anywhere.

"Let's go," he said and started up the tunnel. "How far is it out of this?"

"About a quarter mile, I'd say," the gruff voice did say, stepping up next to him. The others turned back, catching the barge car in the opposite direction while Rosco and the couple others followed, clunching the gravel between ties, and trading verbal barbs. "Where do you want to go?"

"Home." He didn't think Bourne would be there, but he also didn't know where else to start... and he hoped Nicky would be. ~~He~~ Would his brother try to get her first? He was probably there already with such a lead as he had been given. Oneon cursed himself for letting him go. What if he hurt her, held her hostage? Would he do it to control this key? No. They would no longer trap him, he'd make his own decision, go where he pleased, and keep this damn Onyx thing. Onyx... Onyx... regrets again, but not for ~~his~~ Lilee's life, no for her knowledge. He hadn't wanted to know then. Now it seemed vitally important that he did know.

"Lost?" Dick asked. "In thought, I mean." He coughed uncomfortably. How quickly their roles had changed and his gruffness had lost its authoritative edge. Here ~~he~~ he was walking next to a teenager a third his age and he did not know why, but it felt right to do so, even if his eyes did still burn irritably — the little bastard.

"I guess, but what is there to think about? It doesn't matter, it only matters what I do."

"And what you'll do is kill William?"

"I have to or I'm dead, or worse," he said more morosely than he intended.

"Well, we have other steps first, son." And Dick told him about the upcoming checkpoint, the guard station, and the holding areas where ~~barges~~ cars were screened off, scanned, and sifted to root out any illicit material. All of this, or most of it was useless to know, because they were on foot and unlikely to get by without fighting their way through. It wouldn't be easy, in fact it'd be hellishly difficult and Oneon wasn't particularly spry down here in these horrible, endless tunnels.

"Recapping," Oneon said bitterly. "We face a siege of sentry guns, Kops on the ground, blast doors, and Kops in bombshelter level guard boxes who will call for backup the moment they see us?"

"~~Don't~~ If they haven't already."

"Ah right, because Sigrid got away."

"That wasn't our fault," he growled.

"I know, it wasn't anyone's."

"Actually, son, you did rush ahead alone, with no plan, or our help."

"Are you blaming me for her almost killing me?"

"Oneon, it's okay to ask for help, it's not weak to do so."

"I'm NOT weak, and I didn't need help. How was I supposed to know a giant ~~mech~~ mechanical insect would come flying out at me?"

"What did you expect?"

"I — I don't know, but it's not my fault."

"Just... think about it, yourself, more next time — ok?"

"What do you care what happens to me?" he demanded, ~~he~~ ill and angry, trapped, always trapped.

"I do, but more so, you need to care what happens to you."

"Why?"

Dick gave him an exasperated look and Rosco chuckled, changing it to a frown.

"Kids are always the same... why-why-why," Rosco shook his head chuckling still. "Sounds exactly like my son."

"Damn Rosco, sounds like you!" The Burly man laughed.

"True enough, but my WHY is manly and endearing."

"Ha ha! You've never been either!"



"Why George, I'm hurt." he said with mock anguish.

"Pitiful," George laughed. "Yours are pitiful."

"Enough," Dick said. "Anyone got ideas for getting us through the checkpoint?"

"Turn around?" Rosco asked lightly.

"Funny, others?" Up ahead now, in the distant dark, lights flashed and spun. At first the colors were not visible but then Oneon saw it was red along with white. ~~the same~~ No one had come up with anything but when Dick saw that he stopped them with a hushed word. "The alarm has been tripped already. ~~That~~ Tehblin, go scout, you know the signals. ~~with~~ The fourth man, a wiry fellow with a shock of rough cut hair nodded a weathered face and crept quickly ahead into the dark. All their lights were switched off. "We'll follow a ways back," he whispered to them and they moved.

Spinning, flashing, spinning, flashing. Oneon kept his eyes locked on their destination, straining unconsciously to spot the thin man. His head hurt, a pressure set in his forehead like a fat hen, and he imagined his body was made of half-dried glue. The numbness had settled down from the wound as nausea in his stomach. Dizzy, spinning, flashing, flashing, dizzy, blech. He fought a retch and tasted bile... and blood? He swallowed it back and renewed his concentration, struggling for focus that eluded him like Tehblin. He had hoped having a visible anchor the tunnel would not seem so endless but it seemed to have the opposite effect and he became despaired by the idea that this tunnel was now his entire life, what was left of it, and reaching the end meant old age, disease, frailty, death.

"All clear, boss." A deep, baritone said crisply and Oneon nearly jumped out of his skin, his entire unease was momentarily shed in surprise and now he saw the silhouette of the source of that trombone, standing in the middle of the tunnel at the edge of the light, waving both hands above his head.

"Dammit, that wasn't one of the signals," Dick remonstrated him briskly, clearly relieved by the information and unnerved at the same instant.

"Apologies, boss," ~~the~~ stick responded rumbling the tunnel as they walked up to him. He was standing between two sentry guns that had been ravaged by slashes and gashes. They were the size of refrigerators, steel imposing corpses of guns pointing their cannons aster and panels all dark. One was slightly tipped, having been ripped up from the floor. The rest of the scene past these was ghastly. The shatter-proof guard box was smashed open, a Kop draped over the sill of it. Across the tracks lay more, all disenbowed or beheaded or delimbed, all taken apart, and some quivering. The only lights were at odd corners and intervals, red things that flashed or spun maliciously. Sweeping across the blood and bodies, applying fresh coats of red to everything from entrails to shimmering, syrupy puddles. Flashing, spinning, syrupy,...

"Jesus, whose ~~side~~ <sup>side</sup> ~~fact~~ is that big bug on?" Dick said.

"William's," Oneon managed to get out before falling to his knees, dry heaving nothing but a thin stream of bile and maybe, maybe something else. One hand gripped his chest, the other, his right, splayed out before him to keep himself from toppling forward. A large hand patted his back gently. The room, this place, it would not cease moving, rocking, tipping, he would fall into its cloying depths, through charged air, warm and stuffy smells of iron and plasma, flesh and feces, a house of corpses. He heard Dick directing the men behind him but he could not get up, his face was drenched in sweat, but he felt dry and ~~warm~~ put, worn inside out.

The rails spread out here, with dozens of switches where cars could be moved off to isolated sections for inspection ~~and~~ and many of these were out of sight. It was extremely quiet so much so that every sound came out dull but loud, movement in a pillow, Oneon's head was filled with feathers. Squelching, slurping, gross sounds of boots in gooey messes followed by muted snaps and metal clinks, dead things, dead people, soulless bodies being relieved of their weapons. "We... go, let them be, we have to go," Oneon choked in sobbing gasps for air. A tap spun in him, spun by a claw that was a pressure in his frontal lobe, that he would puncture if he could and he would spill out, fall and fall and cover the ground with the sap of his insides, this sticky red sap. Blood is not red, he thought, it is black when it is dead and only a passing light makes it seem red, seem alive or once alive, but none of these were. ~~His~~ Arms wrapped around him and he was lifted. A tearing sticky sound came from his right palm as it came off the ground where it had been suction-cupped in that black ooze. He stared at it, dumbly, dizzy on the sparkly metallic surface of that delicately lined hand, his hand, not his hand, someone else's blood on it, maybe more than one...

He fell. Unconscious.



He swam in blackness, but he could see, no it was ~~red~~ red and it wasn't water, it was too thick. He couldn't get to the surface, there never was a surface, but he heard sounds that were voices speaking. He couldn't understand, couldn't hear, seeing didn't matter, and he couldn't breathe. He panicked, sinking, flailing, swimming to nowhere. ~~But~~ soon he wouldn't be able to hold back and he would drink blood involuntarily. He wanted to suffocate first. The pressure was too much and he tried to scream instead of drink, closing his eyes tightly, and he tasted blood but only a little. Instead spaces opened up by his mouth and spread out fresh tendrils of the vacuum that became tunnels. And he was filling them, all of the tunnels, with his being. All people he knew and had known were running from this expansion and he felt cramped, trapped, confined by their passages. His scream had dug. Some he wanted to run, some he wanted to save, and others to crush, but he could not help what happened to whom and it all got mixed up. Dick was smashed, Lilee ran, and Bourne was saved. Where did the others go? He could not stop himself but there was nowhere left to go so he pushed up through the ground, forcing his way through it, and up up up, leaving all those behind, lost, dead, saved, crushed, all of them. Closer, he could sense the surface, he would break the surface to be free, so he could breathe again, taste again, and hear again because all he could see was this bloody rock and dirt. He ~~it~~ was slowing down, it wouldn't work, but ~~it~~ it had too so he pulled his will to the fore only that made it worse. The more he pushed, the slower, to. More strength, more! He could see light through the soil and hear talking in the sunlight and more, he was almost there, barely dragging upward and Bourne! He saw Bourne in the light talking at him but to others and he woke.

"Bourne!"

"With, easy son," Dick pushed him back down onto a stone bench. His light was on, no, that was a street light, they were above ground and in the city... and the nightly blackout was over. He rested elbows on his legs and put his head in his hands, threading his fingers through his wavy black hair at the temples and back onto his scalp, until he leaned up and looked at Dick.

"What happened?" Even though he knew.

"You fainted, we carried you," he said simply.

"Kops?"

"None, quite eerie. All of them either fled or died at the checkpoint. No sign off that big bug bastard."

"New name?" Oneon smiled weakly. "BBB?" He felt clear, clarified, solid. ~~the~~ No taste of blood, hard to tell where the numbness began, warm there — was that good or bad? The armor was mesh, Dick handed him his helmet, "Can you walk?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just, uh, really grossed out."

"Might get worse than that," he said somewhat sadly, his eyes distant.

Oneon didn't want to think of what that might mean. "Where are we? Is it 6 already?"

"We're a couple blocks in from South Wall. I set you down here when you started thrashing. The guys are scouting a ways out. Come on, we need to move now."

"Where are all the commuters?"

"It's not even 3, like I said son, ~~it's~~ it's eerie."

They walked along the street, lights buzzing in a creepily reminiscent way, the canal waters shifting lazily in the cold. ~~It must~~ Frost collected on everything except water, which had grown a shell of ice. Except, of course, the canals which were heated by Core City's geothermal processing near Central. This spread out from the center and the poor used the luke warm water as is for bathing, sometimes hardly filtered or not at all for extreme cases like gypsies. The closer you were to central, the warmer it was, and fog enveloped that area in cold temperatures like this, snaking along the canals as blood in veins to pump the city full of fog. Oneon sometimes thought it must look like Cloud City from the outside. Why it wasn't foggy all the time, like earlier in the night, he didn't know, but it was never as thick as it was in the destroyed sector.

"Do you know where you're going?" he asked Dick.

"No," he responded. "We're just moving to move, I don't want to be a sitting duck. I only come as far as these blocks, so beyond that we'll take your lead."

"You won't," Oneon said softly.

"Excuse me?"

"You can't come with me, you'll slow me down." And he couldn't bear the thought of then ending up like those kops, but he thought that reason didn't make as much sense, so it wasn't worth saying.



"What?" Dick wore an expression of complete shock, he stopped walking. "You can't make us leave, not after all that."

"You're right, but I can ask." Oneon gave him a pleading look. "Please."

"We're responsible for our own fate, son." "You know that."

"I know," Oneon lied. "I should go." He pulled on his helmet.

"Where should we go?"

"Home," and with that he blasted off the spot in a heavy pushing sprint, boots digging into the pavement, cracking it and sending him, a missile down the street, leaving his new friends in a cold, foggy dust. He didn't think they'd go, or stay home, but he couldn't see what happened to them, be responsible for them, either. So he left, at top speed, making a ruckus of the noise, conspicuous, and he didn't care. He felt light-headed, almost giddy, and the stuffiness of the underground was, uncovered, he was lifted by the outside air, he floated on it as long strides sent him down block after block in cliffs, rolling as he landed. This! This was so much better, alone, free, feeling fast and strong, singular goal again, trading the copper-colored fall forest for a gray-gleaming concrete city, soft to hard, jungle is jungle, and the relief of the moment fed his adrenaline. Anything, he could take on anything, up here, lonely skyscrapers stared with admiration. No other pedestrians around and he'd never been out on empty streets so lit with windows, were there people behind them? He'd never run so fast amongst these tall stone watchers. He had always wanted to run like this, but away, and here he was going into the thick of it, returning, he was going home, was it his home anymore?

He was nearing the fringe now and the buildings scraped the sky from a shorter height, skeletal frames with fiery eyes, dim winking flames from various immigrant and gypsy camps who did not seem to care if they were caught — open fires were illegal after all. Why burn precious resources when heat came freely from Central? Of course only citizens had residential exes with such working utilities and those looking for work, citizenship, or perhaps something less savory had to make due without if they couldn't find spots in residential skyscrapers. How did they get in, he wondered as usual. Or, who let them in? If security was so tight then they either had ways of their own or they were being smuggled in, but for what purpose? They always appeared to be isolated, meaningless camps. Then again, these immigrants flaunted their lawlessness flagrantly because they had nothing to lose and citizens didn't want to be expelled from the only way of life they had ever known, risk versus no risk, high to low and whatnot. The survival outside Core City was tough and jailing or expulsion wasn't much of a deterrent against the promise, or potential, of luxury and comfort, days without struggle, days with leisure. Yet Oneon felt it had made them all soft and now, in a time of crises, the city sat silent, fearfully folding in on itself without any righteous or inquisitive dissent, the only dissent being the usual top bribing antics of outsiders burning trash in barrels. Where did they even find barrels? The debris style junk in fringe buildings astounded him, and it was left there, because it was worthless to collect. Broken glass, pipes, dry wall piles now piles of white dust, yellowed paper, rusty tools, rotter boards, all relics left by Builders that saved all these bellies and riskless ones by giving them a shell to inhabit, reinforce, and heat. Their junk, though decades — almost a century old — would never be enshrined or placed in a museum. It was being burned as fuel to heat those less fortunate, less lucky, less lazy.

No, they were lazy in their own way, probably. The only thing separating a gypsy and a citizen was circumstance and everything else derived from that. Oneon thought that had roles been reversed, people switched places, the same result would have occurred. It was human behavior, it was inevitable. What separated an entire group or classification from each other was the few extraordinary people who became leaders. Core City was a socialist democracy, now entirely Committee and so few had faith in much ever actually happening. It idled pleasantly along, blissfully unlaboring under the idea that this reprieve of violence and self-enforced isolation could last forever.



And then a monkey wrench, a wrench bites a snake, and a fang appears on a boy's arm and the whole thing is defenseless. It may rot, invisibly, seeming fine for a while longer before suddenly collapsing. In a way this was a repeat of the Collapse and Oneon supposed that all civilizations must rise and fall at the moment they believe they are perfectly safe. Perfect.

This neighborhood was familiar, he slowed down and began to move more stealthily, using the insides of the skeletal watchers as well as the streets. He took round-about ways that led him through misty, near pitch dark hallways, over rickety pedestrian bridges that webbed between so many buildings even out here on the fringes, and avoiding typical places where immigrants made mass camps. He also stayed above the canals and sewers; he only knew then a little and the idea of going under-ground again repulsed him. The thought of it made him try to feel the numb area of his chest, its perimeters, but that eluded him and he didn't want to slow down for a more intimate inspection of himself. Besides, physically he felt great.

He peered out a window, became a cell of a watcher, a pupil in a window, and stared out at the culdesac where on the other side was his home building. The middle had been a blood bath and the door of it stood open, staring back, two doors but only one open — had they left it that way, had no one else entered? There were several large, dark splotches of frozen liquid in the intervening area, but no kops, no bodies, no cycles, and as if living the memory he reimagined the scene and that ~~gun~~ a gateling gun splashing bullets, Freeman grinning and grimacing while stealing the lives of so many. They had fired on kops as kops had fired on him later. It was a tough day to work in government, You're either shooting or getting shot and most probably don't even know why. He only had a minor clue, that William had planned a coup, a mutiny, a hostile take-over for some time and he, Oneon, had been a catalyst, an unwitting participant that kick-started an internal war that most citizens knew nothing about. But where were the bullets? He saw pieces of cycles that had been left when the rest were picked up, but no bullets, only blood and ... ice. Ice? Not only had William been planning this, he had been inventing new weapons for that purpose and Onyx must be his top weapon. That didn't make sense though, why didn't he just make another, in a dozen years how hard could it have been? What made it so special?

He gazed at his hand, turning it over, grasping and splaying, feeling all the joints and muscles that were not joints and muscles but special cervos, gears, and hydraulics, so intricate that he could not imagine how to assemble such a wondrous thing. And it was his. Onyx was his. He would not give his arm up. He steeled himself for whatever battles lay ahead and he felt ready. Exhilarated, scared, angry a little, ready. He would show Bourne, be better than h.s... Foster brother. He was probably inside now, probably talking to Nicky. It was a great excuse to say he needed something for this war, but what could he possibly have? He was going to enjoy himself without Oneon around, why had he let him go? No, that was irrational, but Oneon could not shake these thoughts and that little anger grew, stoked into a frustration that flowed hotly through cool angst. He tore himself away from the window and went up a couple stories, trying to be quiet, but unable to focus and he stumbled a couple times on loose junk. He kicked these things in a fury. What were they doing here? Why were they in his way? He knew it was petty but he felt the world was laughing at him and the universe was making the jokes. And he was the punch line.

Punch gun. Bourne had an age-grow arm, his entire life, but it had never been hidden. He used it excessively, preening with it like a peacock, and lording it over Oneon as if his then only human arms were yet another deficit. Oneon ~~was so~~ never thought to wonder how they, poor folks, had ever afforded such miracle technology, rather why he didn't get one too. And he had! He had it this whole



time, his whole life, and his mother could not deign to tell him, stoop down, and give him a leg up, an arm up. It was because she wasn't his mother and she didn't want him to be better than her son, Bourne. It made him sick with resentful anger to mull, but mull he did, and the torrent pulsed and pumped within. The power of it came almost unbidden and he wanted to use it to thrash, to regain a sense of himself, worthwhile, to destroy something of worth, someone of worth so he wouldn't be worthless. His arm shimmered and a tesla-scrunched ball of light and angry energy danced eagerly in the barrel of that magic cannon. He meant to sneak, ~~he~~ instead he stalked like a bouncer, a gorilla, over a pedestrian connection over to his building, staring straight ahead after one sweeping, swift and superfluous look around. He didn't care if he was spotted, he wanted to be set upon so he could attack, release this rage, and feed his cannon, let it chew something up. He no longer felt scared, only anticipation, and entering his building, the cyan light from his torch out-glowed the weak, winking hall lights which were so sparse as to be completely ineffective. He cast his shadow long down the halls and it hardly wavered in the sickly yellow lamps still managing to live beyond the poverty and neglect. He did not bother muffling his foot falls.

He beat the stairs, hitting each step deliberately and challenging all those pathetic weaklings hiding in their apartments to come out and stop him as they failed to stop the thugs that dragged him out only hours ago. Up and up he climbed and his energy did not flag, he started leaping up each flight in a single stride for each, ~~he~~ enjoying the lightness and speed, the building spinning down around him squarely, and soon he reached their floor. He saw the marks where he had been dragged, drops of blood from the flesh wrapper of his hand now thankfully shed, he did not ever wish to repeat that pain again or hide this magnificent hand, gun, torch, key. He turned a corner to his hall.

"Ah, the young gun returns," a Russian accent said, Gunbo rising from a chair, one of their chairs, ~~that he had been~~ "It's like, we knew you come home. We watched, for example, with cameras." That must have been the reason for the street lights: all the civilian cameras as well that the Central could tap into; at least that was a conspiracy theory now proved.

"Where's your friend?" Oneon kept walking, slower, raising his cannon to point forward but glancing around. He wanted to be careful but he wanted more to pummel that pinched face, why hadn't Ron finished him off — either time?

"If I am telling you," he said flexing his hands and stretching his behemoth chest. "Then I am giving away. Nothing for you, nothing for free." He popped his thumbs, and rubbed the gold rings on either hand eagerly.

"No gun?"

Gunbo grinned evilly, shaking his head, and tapping a finger on his right shoulder. Then he started towards Oneon, hands outstretched, walking like a starving zombie or Frankenstein's monster. He meant to grab him, of course, and probably tear his arm off — could he do that? Oneon still, still did not know how deep Onyx was embedded in him. He didn't care, the urge was too strong not to attack. He shot forward, propelled by a great push off, yelling, tugging the handle within, throwing his arm cannon forward, walls reverberating as wildly as his dash, his arm, this torch, carried forward to the fore by anger and impulse, and smashing into Gunbo's chest with a brief flash and a thunderous boom that sent him careering backwards down the hall into ~~the~~ the wall, flickering lamp exploding. All lamps exploding as Gunbo stretched his arms to stop himself but only managed to scrape, break, and bend everything on his way backwards. He pulled himself up, plaster and door frames falling away from him in a clatter and briefly looked at his chest. His shirt was blackened and tattered but underneath was a smooth metallic gold. "No gun, ha!" he popped his neck and restored the grin from a momentary frown.



"Now it is my turn," he stalked towards Oneon deliberately, watching him closely, his arms wide by his sides, down turned, gorilla-like in his gait. Oneon was breathing heavily and eager to hit again and again, his right fist felt larger, heavier, and more satisfying in the kinetic impact than had he simply shot him; he could do that later if he wanted to or needed to. He moved forwards, passing his door which sat slightly ajar, and he thought he could see inside, was someone waiting inside for him? And Nicky's door passed on his left, it was closed. Good, she was safe, but he also hoped she was watching - somehow - or at least listening, witnessing his heroics, his new self so much better than the old weak one.

They collided then, Oneon firing his fist rapidly and dodging Gumbo's heavy swings. They were close, standing, and communicating in a fury of limbs. When his fist connected, he felt a soft impossible wall as lead, or gold, yielding but undefeatable and he knew he'd have to strike his head, but Gumbo used his height ~~and~~ to cover the fight and his arms as an umbrella. Oneon could not hit him with his pathetic left and Gumbo used both hooks, grinning, a pinched wild grin, a triumphant grin, prematurely triumphant. He jabbed with one fist, pulling back with the other, and Oneon heard a pop and a hiss as the hydraulics shot the punch forward down, towards his chest and he brought both arms up just in time to take the impact, but he had his left in front and he felt as if a ~~arm~~ tank had just hit him. CRACK! He slid slightly backwards, a tears of pain stung his eyes, and the searing lightning pain shot through his forearm which a moment later began to feel familiarly numb. At this point he was on the defensive, his fury turning to anxiousness, not fear, it wasn't fear was it? And Gumbo pushed inexorably forward, wild eyes trying to pin him, as his fists tried to pummel him. He had to think but he couldn't think, there were deadly fists everywhere, his left arm felt useless, and he relegated his right to protection, keeping him alive, for he knew this monster wanted to crush his skull. He couldn't make his fist a cannon, there seemed to be no time, everything was moving in fast forward. There was no space in here, he was trapped in a tunnel above ground, high, above, ground.

He rolled backwards, standing up before a door, and then ducked as Gumbo's fist came down on it. The door crumpled like cardboard and Oneon spun, pirouetting, inside the apartment. The lights were on but no one was in the main room. It was a messy place and his boots crunched over dishes on the floor, napkins, food wrappers as a television spewed meaningless images and sounds into the room, the news was on. Gumbo appeared in the doorway. "It's like, for example, I am breaking, you are entering," and he stepped in, towards the small, blue-armored form of Oneon who cradled his left arm, glaring, and sucking in air. Gumbo dripped sweat from his curly hair, down his pinched face, and he wiped it briefly with one arm, trench coat still on.

Sam's face appeared, on the TV, as the scrolling text and lowered volume reported this unstable law kop as ~~he~~ having gone rogue other face appearing: Lilee, then hostages, brain-washed: Oneon Bourne. A few others that Oneon had never seen and this happened in his peripheral vision. He let his arms down by his sides and transformed the right into a canon, whipping up a powerful charge that gave him a zinging sensation in his left as it passed through his body. He fired a shot at Gumbo's head who had nearly crossed the room to him and there was a flash and a bang and a reverberation that rattled the dishes on the floor and sent nick nacks off the shelves down to them, but he had raised a hand quickly to cover his face, and had somehow warded off the damage though tendrils of steam or smoke snaked up off his hand. His grin had not disappeared, but a gun in his other hand had appeared and it began firing, ripping up the apartment, automatic, spraying towards Oneon who ran the other direction and returned with blasts of his own. He heard screaming from another room, the apartment was digested in gunfire, and flecks ~~of~~ of everything flitted about, ~~the room~~ a sand storm of torn up household objects and pieces of the building itself. Now he was in front of the door they had traded places, he turned on his heel, sweeping low, and then propelling himself towards Gumbo whose fire had gone post and not yet corrected.

Oneon fired again and again, straight forward, sprinting, milliseconds, Gumbo whitening out in the light smearing their vision, and he saw arms go up, gunfire cease, and he threw himself at him, fire, blast, bang, all his energy pouring out into this tackle. He was crashing into him, throwing them both backwards, and crashing through the window at the fog level, beyond the fire escape, shards of glass accompanying them and their journey down, falling, falling, not again, not now, out over the culdesac. Gumbo tried to hug Oneon to his chest, his grin gone, face pale and eyes wide, but Oneon pulled backwards, planted his boots on that golden torso, and shot ~~him~~ off him with all his might and will.

"Augh!" Gumbo yelled in a loud, accented grunt and then poofed out of sight in the fog cloud while Oneon stretched and reached and somehow managed to crash onto a fire



escape, grabbing the metal with his right hand and swinging under the railing to land with a crash on the grating, panting heavily. He couldn't calm his breathing to listen at the correct time or there was simply no crash as Gumbo hit the ground. He got to his feet and ~~sc~~scated the side of the building, back up to the window they had come out of, disregarding the fire escape, and pulling himself over the sill. He saw a door close as he did. He crunched over the ruins of the room the confetti of debris still leaning a dusty haze. He peeked out into the hallway but saw no one, it was quiet again. Instead of going to his door, he went straight to Nicky's and knocked.

"Nicky? It's me." It sounded silly to him, but what else could he say? He thought he heard movement within, a brief flashing of the peep hole, but the door remained closed, and it remained quiet, voiceless, answerless. He knocked again, trying to make it sound nice and not forceful, he didn't want to scare her anymore than she had been. "Hello? Nicky? It's Oneon. There's nothing to be afraid of." His voice sounded different to him, what was it? He took off his helmet, ran a hand through his wavy black hair, and took a deep breath. His voice wasn't shaking, it didn't crack, and he wasn't angry. Was she afraid of him? He recalled that horrified look when they had first been taken, when he had first changed, in the kitchen... he turned, armor deactivated, and proceeded to his old apartment.

The door would not shut, it had been leaned back to the frame, and when he opened it it merely fell forward with a loud, sucking boom. He had forgotten that Gumbo had smashed it in completely. He stepped onto it and it popped and creaked in worthless protest, a beaten thing, and the only light was what little still shone in the hallway. He could see bloody flesh lying inert on the ground in light splatters of dried blood—his had that human shell, that he had assumed was his arm for so long. He bent down and touched a finger to a finger tip, the nail still on it, so curious. They were so similar.

Crouched, touching fingers to fingers, alive to dead, ~~the~~metal to flesh, and yet he could sense the touch. Which was more him? How did they achieve this? ~~He~~He never had much interaction with any technology much less age-grow cybernetics. He had always been more envious of Bourne than curious about how it worked and how it felt and now a bug of loneliness bit him. It wasn't the same one of feeling trapped and misunderstood. No, this an artificial limb, connect, commiserate, share.

He stood up slowly and absently righted a chair, heading towards his bedroom. He walked slowly, he thought slowly, he approached slowly, smoothly, he felt his movements were graceful like Ron's but he did not dwell on it. There he stood in his bedroom which didn't have much except clothes everywhere, a handful of books, pictures of scenery, vintage posters, a deck of cards, and a guitar that he had always intended to learn to play. His bedding was messed up, there he had wept, cried so often, and now he traded those tears for blood. He did not need to cry anymore. He left his bedroom and closed the door, it held nothing for him.

He poured himself a cup of water, drank it quickly, and poured another. This one he took past the living room... into Bourne's room. It had been years since he was either allowed in here or would even set foot of his own volition. The bed was neatly made, books and journals arranged on a simple bookshelf, and a computer sitting on the desk. He had, of course, gotten the one computer they could afford and Oneon was expected to share it, but he never asked and always turned down Bourne's insistence on him using it. So he had no online life, no offline life, and that suited him so long as he never had to set foot in his enemy's room, previously his brother, now completely unknown. The floor was clear, a dresser held all his clothes, a basket by the door the dirty ones, and sports posters decorated the walls. Why had he come in here? Bourne was obviously gone and did not appear to have come here at all—though it was hard to tell since he always put everything away, everything in its place, even his brother. Foster brother. No one, No! He didn't care, he sighed, and his mood evaporated into a calm plain. He wasn't sure what to do next or what this was even for. They knew he was here, William knew he was here, and it wouldn't be long before Gumbo was replaced by Kops or something worse.

The glass was half-full, he emptied it, wiped his mouth ~~to~~with the cuff of his sweatshirt and set it down on Bourne's desk. He turned, closed the door, and left. There was a silhouette in the doorway to the hall, he tensed. "O... Oneon?" Nicky asked timidly. "Yes," he said and she stepped into the room, over the door, and straight up to him.



"Where are your parents?" he asked.

"Gone."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not," she was right in front of him.

"You're not?"

"They're not dead, they just... aren't home." She was looking right at him, slightly taller but his boots evened them out. Long brown hair drawn into a pony tail and large green and hazel eyes, sunflower eyes, opened to him.

"Why aren't you with them?"

She took his right hand and held it with both of hers, tracing it with her thin, delicate fingers. It sent a shiver through him and she looked in his eyes. His ~~ey~~ brow was creased in emotion, in conservation, he did not know why she was here, why she had come here, and yet had not come out earlier. She was vulnerable and putting herself at risk and he looked at those her lips, those lips that had been on his ~~other~~ tear-stained, gross face in what seemed a lifetime ago. He looked back at her eyes, but hers were on his lips. He brought his hand, right hand, up to her face and touched it to her soft jaw and neck. She closed her eyes and sighed.

"Have you been crying?" She nodded, eyes shut.

"I was so scared."

"You should have left, it's too dangerous here."

"But what about you?"

"I'm the reason it's dangerous."

She opened her eyes. "You're not...?"

"No, but the people trying to catch me or kill me are." He didn't want to tell her about Lilee or his fight with Bourne, didn't want to ruin this. His heart thudded and his chest ached, though for desire or from the wound he did not know. His left arm hurt but was slightly numbed and could move it, the armor must have ~~set~~ kept the bone set. He was a wreck and he wondered if he was dying and this would be his last chance to see Nicky or ~~too~~... he leaned forward, still cradling her face which she had pushed further into his ~~hand~~ palm, and kissed her on the lips. Lips that welcomed him and held him at their mercy even though he was leaving awkwardly. She exhaled deeply with her nose, warm air, her air, on his face and basking him in ~~was~~ her atmosphere.



She pulled away slowly, softly, bending her neck, disentangling her arms and wrapping them around his back, and burying her face in his chest. She exhaled deeply and he trembled in his limbs, real and fake, as he too wrapped his arms around her, protective of the jewel that had just walked into this room, his life, after so long of waiting and wanting, and worse: wondering. He couldn't stop that and the momentary bliss became infected by a singular thought, a noun, an object, his ~~own~~ nemesis: Bourne. The adrenaline kept him trembling but it was not from the fight, it was the stuff of anticipation and anxiety at receiving exactly what he had asked for. The future, its goals, now lay in a thick fog as the city in its bed of ~~an~~ Autumn canal mist. Except Bourne. Where was he and, frankly, why did Oneon even care? He was struck then that it was William, not his foster brother, that was his danger but not his first thought. Nicky wrinkled her nose which he did not see, but he felt her move and heard her say: "~~She~~ You stink."

They both chuckled ridiculously. Here everything was on the line and they were standing still in each other's arms and laughing about his body odor. "I still smell better than your farts," he surprised himself by saying and adding a gentle laugh. She pulled away and gave him ~~her~~ a somewhat mortified look.

"You knew, that time I - ~~ugh~~ aw!" And she shook her head, pushing him back, her hair flipping with each shake, eyes shut tight in embarrassment.

"It's nothing," he said, gently again, smiling. Had he gone too far? He had felt so comfortable and now she would hate him. "Hey, look at me. Open your eyes." He held her in his gaze, her eyes seemed to quiver, blooming in tender embarrassment. "You... you are beautiful... but you're only human." He smiled at her and she returned it with a frightened one of her own, a tear ran down her cheek to escape the tension in her eyes. She tried to shake her head so he wouldn't see, but he stopped her with his left and wiped it away with ~~his~~ thumb of his right.

"Oh Oneon," she choked without more tears, perhaps she had found that bottom of her well that he never had. "What is going on?"

"There is too much to tell, but I am what they want - not you. You'll be okay."

"What does she want with you?"

"She?"

"General Sammurai. The television said she's gone rogue, a terrorist, inciting civil war..." she kept talking. Sammurai? "Sam," he said absently, interrupting. He went on, "No no, she's trying to help me, help us. You saw her earlier, you must have."

"No, I'm sorry, I was so scared, I just ran. I don't know what happened. I heard all kinds of noise and-and-screaming, I thought you were dead, you and Bourne. And now your mom, Lilee, she is and they -"

Oneon went cold at the mention. Nicky couldn't stop, babbling out paraphrases of the news bulletins. They had altered their story to include illegal, raider cybernetics and Sam was the leader of a shadowy organization which brainwashed Lilee into acting as a human bomb, but no one talked about motives and there was nothing except dirt on Sam. They cited Ron as her partner, her outside link to Hassan, which everyone already accepted as THE number one enemy to Core City and the future of any peaceful human civilization. To Oneon, it all sounded crackpot crazy, but it must sound sane to the average citizen and he expected they had turned the power on precisely to make sure this message was disseminated to all sectors. Only the rich kept power on indefinitely. Gyms fed building batteries and theoretically ~~and~~ building, whether containing rich or poor, could keep the electricity on by human exertion and whatever they had generated from the solar windmills, but the poor buildings broke down and the rich paid to have servants, bodyguards and security, working the gyms all night. And him running inhumanly fast, an alien cybernetic, fed right into the paranoia, giving them more control. Everything that happened had a rational, albeit wrong, explanation.

she had stopped speaking and was looking at him expectantly. He had stopped listening, but the silence and when she started to use his hated ~~moniker~~ "BB", he perked up with a flash of anger. ~~that~~ she quickly apologized, "But is it true?"

"No," he said flatly. "Basically that is all lies."

"Where-where is your brother?"

"Why do you wish he was here instead?" He hated himself for saying it, and so sharply, but he couldn't seem to help himself. Would he ever escape Bourne's mark on



his life? Here he was, victorious, probably mortally wounded — not that she knew that — and she wanted to know where his brother was. Well, he was the popular one, always.

"No, I mean, I wish you were both here."

"Why?"

"Hey! I care about both of you! Why don't you care about him? Is he okay?"

"I don't know. We... we got split up."

"Oneon," she took his hands again. "He cares about you, you know. He's probably trying to find you right now."

He laughed bitterly, "No. Otherwise he would be here."

"I don't understand, did you come here to find him?"

"No, I came to you. I wanted, I wanted to see you."

"To see me?"

"I don't know, it doesn't matter." Why had he come? The decision seemed so indistinct now as if it had been made by another. Wasn't he looking for Bourne but to make sure he WASN'T here? And now that was true and he was telling Wicky lies. "We need to move, ~~they~~ more will come here, they know I'm here. You — you should go home and stay hidden until this is over." He dropped his arms, locked his jaw, the pain of what he was doing and not getting any answers... but how could he ask? What if the world ended, this world, their world? Well, he had kissed her and her him, but did that mean anything? How many times would they have to kiss ~~for~~ for it to matter, for it to be enough for him?

"No, you haven't told me anything! I'm going with you!"

"You can't keep up with me."

"Don't get cocky with me, god! Sometimes you're as dense as a rock! Just when I think I could get through, you wall up!"

"Calm down, okay, fine, let's just get out of here." He didn't want to argue. "You might want a coat, it's freezing out there."

"I left it in your room," she said and went in there to get it. For the instant that she was in there and out of his sight he felt incredibly alone and lonely and suddenly he was glad she was coming with him. It didn't matter that she liked Bourne because he wasn't here with her. That would be good for now and it would be nice to have the company he had always wanted and not the ones by accident or that he had always tried to avoid... unsuccessfully until now.

"What's the plan?" She asked approaching him from behind in a big, puffy coat that looked like a flotation device sprouting hair, fake hair. She slipped her hand in his and ~~he~~ a shiver of inexplicable excitement and pleasure went through him. It made him feel brave, worthwhile; she had come to him.

"Follow me," he said unnecessarily, leading her ~~back~~ across the floor to the window. He opened it, put his finger to his lips, and leaned slowly out to look around and listen. Any sound he might have heard was eaten whole by the fog which sucked lazily at the buildings, cloaking the watchers, and he hoped keeping them out of sight too. However, this was his home, and someone must be watching it right now. He turned and left her back through the apartment and out into the hall. She was about to speak but he shook his head and put the finger to his lips. He kept looking around and tilting his ears to listen. He concentrated and the noise of televisions, all on the same broadcast, came to him. It sounded omniscient, coming from everywhere, at different volumes, through the walls, and the buzz of lamps struggling to stay lit, burning dust, the cracks of the hallway and the wall where Gumbo had struck bled dust. How long until they came for him? They went into Nicky's apartment where all lights were off, television off, looking like everyone was in bed or on vacation. He did not turn on the lights, but went over to their living room window. Here there was no fire escape. He pressed his face and then his ear to the glass. There was a slight rumbling. He could feel Nicky's pulse through her hand, he gently let it go, putting her hands down, and signalling to be quiet still as he opened the window and peered out.

"Why are we being quiet now?" She whispered nervously.

"Shh, I want to listen."

"For what?"

"Shh!" He raised his eyebrows, <sup>at her</sup> and she hunched silently.



The fog below pulsed with a brief light. They had wasted too much time talking... and the kiss. Oh well, that was worth it, he thought, and he had a ridiculous idea that would probably scare Nicky, but he wasn't going to get caught in here, and he couldn't sneak with her either. Plus, he didn't feel like sneaking, he felt like showing off and what better way? He put his arm around her waist, it felt good to do so, exciting and she tensed, looking at him questioningly. Hmm... logistics.

He activated his armor, pulled on his helmet, looked out the window one last time then back at her. "Climb on my back," he said opening the window as far as it would go. She looked at him dubiously. "You're not that heavy," he assured her and bent his knees while she climbed on. Oh, but she was, she probably weighed more than him — not that he would ever tell her that — but thankfully the boots helped, somehow, establishing an equilibrium that allowed him an increased carry weight and he hoisted her up, shifting her a bit, holding her knees with his left arm which ached to do so.

"What are you going to do," she whispered nervously behind his helmet, over his shoulder.

"Just hold on tight," and with that she squeezed him so that a jab of pain went through his chest and he gasped. "Agh, not that tight, just try not to fall off."

"Fall off? Oh h!" Her question turned into a hiss and a rush that blended with the whirl of wind created by their momentum ~~and~~ as he left out the window, arm changing, growing glowing slightly as they sailed over the alley between the buildings above the net of mist below that he knew would not catch them if they dropped, but they didn't. And it wasn't that that he worried about, it was the upcoming impact into the neighboring building and he realized his gun had been off, they were not heading for another window. They were flying towards a wall.

One's adrenaline peaked at he crashed through the wall into an alternate progression of time, slower, flatter, and still harrowing, still too fast, and he prepared to crash through the wall of stone. He shot out his fist and it smashed through the brick and concrete and rebar and all manner of plumbing, and he followed smashing painfully into it with his face and body, feeling Nicky do the same against him and his helmet. This is what helmets are for, he thought, a bizarre mental reprieve from the insanity of dangling off the side of a building, dozens of stories above the ground and a river of fog, yes it appeared to be moving, and glowing lightly, tasting blood from his scraped face and cut lip. Nicky was sucking in air and beginning to power up her vocals before he stopped her sternly.

"Do NOT scream," he said from a mouth pressed against the damp wall. It tasted of minerals and many many years out in the elements, excusing filthy humans but absolved of touching them. He was tasting the Builders' work; had they ever done that? How long was this stuff supposed to last anyway? Well, this one had a hole broken through it by a boy with a broken arm and a wrecking ball fist. He explored with his right hand but kept them pinned to the wall too, his arm was almost straight through level with his shoulders, and he would tire before long.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked both meekly and with menace.

"Look for a window, isn't there one above us." Silence, great, had he imagined that?

"Yes, but — how do ~~we~~ we get to it?"

"You." He said. "You will climb up, here ~~that~~ pull yourself up by my other arm." He gritted his teeth and slid his left arm up, raising it in front of him, touching her face. He felt her shaking her head. "Hey," he said. "It's okay, take my hand." Finally a trembling hand crept into his and he gripped it, straining to keep his arm straight as angry spikes of pain threatened to make him let go. "Now, your leg up..."

"I can't. I'll fall!"

"One leg up, ~~that~~ you got this, you're fine." He cooed encouragingly. He had no idea if it was helpful but he couldn't think, his body was strained and his mind was in pure will power mode. She began shifting instead, on his back, tucking on his arm that gave a bit but he pulled it back up, with her, and she managed to get her leg over his right shoulder. "That's it, now up, there you go." Her legs wobbled, she whimpered, and she now



stood on his shoulders, or crouched, still holding his hand tightly.

"I can't reach it!"

"Yes you can, but you need to let go of my hand," sweat dribbled fitfully across his crinkled brow and into his eyes. He spoke tightly, struggling to enunciate each word carefully, his body shook with strain. If she would not go now, there was no hope. A brief image of her falling and screaming flashed through his mind and he nearly lost all concentration, causing her to squeal in panic as his arm, filled with a lightning storm of pain, gave out on her. "You... must..."

She let go of his hand and their bodies wavered in the balance. He tried to stay rigid, control his breathing, and—

"Oh my God!"

"Don't... look... down!" Thankfully neither of them could yell, one out of anxiety the other out of physical strain and the fact that his face was smooshed up against the side. She continued to stretch and they vibrated together as her knees extended unsteadily and she slid up the wall, pressing herself to it even though the smooth surface gave no hand holds. "Augh!" Her weight disappeared and she was suspended in air, to fall to her doom and there was nothing he could do.

"Nicky!" He yelled reflexively but she did not fall past him.

"Onee! Help me—" Her voice was soon muffled, disappearing into the air above him and he craned his neck awkwardly, but she was not there. He heard a window shut and he knew she had been taken. Taken due to his foolish heroics. He hit his helmeted head against the wall a couple times but this did nothing to remedy the situation. He pulled his arm out and gripped the inside rebar giving him some flexibility to hang out and look around. This building, unlike his own, had a few solar windmills that sat motionless in the sitting air, protrusions of propellers, and many did not appear to work anymore. Likely some philanthropist project which deals in the initial, gaining publicity, but neglects the meat of maintenance. Windows were lit and he spotted many outlines of figures watching him with nervous curiosity. No one yelled out to assist, no one did anything, they just stood there in their homes, watching from the watchers, a ~~stone~~ stone spider with thousands of eyes trained on him. How had he thought to be unseen? At least one of these manic spies would phone the police — wouldn't they?

There was nothing for it except to drop. His shoulder ached and he did not think his magical arm could even help him, besides giving him an iron grip. Better to plan a fall than rely on a leap that might fail. He lifted his legs, setting one of his feet on the wall and was surprised to feel it stick almost like glue. On these boots, he was lucky to have all this great junk to save his miserable life. What was left of it, and his left ~~arm~~ arm did not feel as fancy. He managed to get both feet on the wall, back up, wind up, and ran clockwise with his swinging arcing right arm and then release, release into free fall, out into the air, hundreds of feet above the ground, and he was not scared. It felt glorious. He raised his arms above his head, bent one knee up and forward, and landed lightly, perfectly on one of the protrusions. Or he thought it so, but it groaned under his weight and snapped off like the bulb of a plant or a scab on the face of this cold stone watcher. Now he was scared! He was thinking too much, how had he stopped his fall before? He couldn't remember! It had always been so automatic, instinctual, and here he was completely conscious and lucid and doomed by it!

He slammed his fist into ~~the~~ his falling companion, the windmill, and it shot away from him, bouncing between the buildings like a ping pong ball. He tried to touch the wall to grip something, but it slid and smashed by him adding the debris of sills and wire and other garbage to his freefall sear. He tried to kick out from the wall but it spun him head over heel and now he was upside down, swallowing the fog as he hit that cloud layer, cool mist like ~~from~~ water hit his throat and burned. His eyes burned, he was plummeting to the earth, a comet, a fallen angel, weeping the karma of sending Gumbo down the same way. Gumbo!

In a split second, a split of a split, he saw that pinched face upturned and grinning at him, his arms outstretched, on a pedestrian crossing? Onee did not think this time, he fired, shimmering, sending reflections of energy throughout the cloud that burned away from him, and he hit that massive man monster in a blinding light, gritting his teeth, feeling the heat of the shots he unleashed, smelling burning flesh and thick body odor and stale cloth, hair, SMASH! He felt them breaking through the floor of this



bridge, leaving a thug-shaped hole no doubt, and huge arms enveloped him, he heard a laughing, a forced heaving that splattered through Gumbo's ruined face. They hit another bridge and this time stopped in a heap, arms squeezing, vice closing, Oneon felt the needles of the armor bending in his flesh and he tried to scream, he couldn't stop it, and his face was right next to this monster's.

"It's like, for example, I am giving hug to forgive," the thing declared joyfully. Trapped! This was far worse than falling to one's death and Oneon felt panicked in spite of the awful pain. He tried to thrash, unthinkingly flailing, but it was no use, he was trapped, his legs kicked but he could not get leverage as he had done before. They were lying amongst the wreckage of descent on a bridge in the fog and he could not see nor move and he felt a blackness rising, threatening to overtake his vision and drown him in its depths. He stopped struggling, threatening to pull himself together and satisfaction and fought instead to pull himself together. He was slipping away and he dove into that, searching for something to save him, and there was the handle, the sense of something within, something indelible that he could lay hold of though his arms in reality were pinned. He was inside himself, in another time, outside watching his inert form and hearing Gumbo ~~start~~ starting to joke about "playing dead". There were more kops coming, if Gumbo was ever a kop, and they did not appear to be on his side. Dust of debris continued sprinkling down through the mist and somewhere he heard a familiar whistle. No. He did not need help he was better than before, he would get Nicky back, he would stop all of this himself! He laid hold of his willpower and drew on it suddenly and with all his might.

Dust flew to him as if drawn by a magnet, the bridge shook with reverberation, and small points of light materialized and flew to him as bees returning to the hive, zipping in with a crackling and submerging in his inert form, the little boy, the teenager, shimmered as energy passed in a wave through him, and another, several tides, soaking into his right arm and punched forward, blasting himself backwards, firing on the floor under Gumbo and flying in a ragdoll arc onto ~~the~~ an empty portion of the bridge. Gumbo's grip broken and the floor shattered, he raised slightly as if to get up but dropped with a crash down into the hole, legs following, and leaving a frustrated sound or perhaps a chuckle in his wake. This time Oneon heard the crash but it was also followed by a sizzling explosion that sent tendrils of sparkling energy tendrils up near the bridge.

He breathed a long exhale, sitting up, propping himself up, and then slowly, deliberately getting to his feet, still armed, feeling surprisingly good for nearly being crushed. A hand tried to go under his left to help him up as he shook it off, nearly falling in the process. "I said I don't need your help."

"~~Are~~ you're still alive. You're getting up even though you've fallen."

"Very funny, did you get your stupid weapon?"

"I never said it was a weapon. Listen, we need to get out of here."

Oneon faced his brother, impeccable costume, night shades, red scarf, armor deactivated for the moment, matching helmet, leather gloves. He might have been auditioning for how clean and unscathed he looked, besides the scrapes and bruising on the skin of his face which only added to the manly, handsome appearance. Oneon wiped grime off his own battered face, no five o'clock shadow for his injuries to blend seamlessly with. He took off his helmet and shook his head. "I'm going to get Nicky. You know, the girl you kissed and then left to die."

"Nicky? She was safely unknown until you came here announcing yourself to the city like a damn rock concert. We need to leg."

"Safe!? Look at you, what do you know about safe except for saving yourself?"

"Look at me? You're a mess! And all this happened after I ... I left." He sighed.

"And I am alive, they're dead!"

"Maybe, but we don't know where the other is and I believe—"

"FREEZE!" A voice shouted with lawful authority. "Throw down your arms!"

Oneon laughed, he couldn't help it, and Barne gave a sad, wry smile.

"Don't kill them," he said.

"I'll set for stun."

"Do you know how to do that?"

"No."



They both dove forward past one another and the bridge erupted in gunfire, energy blasts and bullets tore up the stone and some bounced off the armor, refracted or reflected. There were shooters at either end as well as in the windows. He struck out with fists and feet, falling into himself, into this instinct that he would not question now. The fog pulsed like storm clouds and strobe lights illuminated him enough to be frightening, here then there, dodging, ducking, and striking. Yesterday he was afraid of the law, today in the wee hours of his birthday, he was punching it. And then ~~there~~ he was at the entrance to the building passageway, unconscious forms at his feet, the sounds of urgent shuffling in rooms nearby, ~~last~~ jackboots on stairs, moving through doorways and Bourne appeared at his side.

"Good job, brother - now, quickly!" He started forward, into their building.

"No," Oneon said turning around, back towards the bridge. "I have to save Nicky!"  
 "You don't know where she is! You can't fight a whole - oh hell!" He was interrupted by Kops pouring out into the hallway. They moved smoothly and Oneon thought he saw sparks as Bourne's fist made contact - riot bots. As he fought, he thought of Nicky, taken, scared, his fault! It wasn't his fault was it? Bourne was just jealous he hadn't come here, saved her, or kissed her, that he hadn't been the rescuer this time. These foes, though being many as opposed to one, were much easier and he became more and more confident with each one that he took down. He got into the pattern of it and became more flashy and daring with his maneuvers, taunting them though he knew some to not even be human at all and that made him wonder about E. Here in this gloom he could even think of other things and that elated him, he felt incredibly boosted. He did stunts off the walls, flowing with dancer grace but ignorant exuberance into each strike and dodge, fighting forcefully with confident panache. Bourne remained tight and conservative in his circle, often waiting to witness his opponent's first move, whether a strike, shot, or even a pause, before returning it. He ~~he~~ had a gun strapped to his leg, but he did not draw it and neither did Oneon fire with his cannon. Not that he held to the morality of murder, these ~~men~~ ~~were~~ were not so innocent, but he wanted to show he didn't need it, despite that some of them shot at him.  
 "I'm going!" He shouted above the fray.

"No, Oneon, come with me!" Bourne could not turn from his attackers, held at bay in the hallway that he methodically fought his way down. Bodies slumped everywhere and at all angles, some groaning, shaking their heads to restore consciousness, others twitching inhumanly. There were more flooding in. Oneon did not answer, he knew Bourne could handle himself, and he didn't care. He ~~last~~ crouched and slid back out onto the bridge and dashed across in one step then jumped high, very high into the air and fog, followed and passed only by bullets and beams, some striking his armor which seemed to pulse dangerously - how much could it endure - and this time he smashed satisfyingly through a window and not into the wall.

More room lights, more television, and bedroom doors shut tight. He was not alone, but he wouldn't trouble these passive observers long, he ran out and up the hall, down to the opposite side of the building, out through another window and up the fire escape, jumping up between floors, one, three, he lost count. Up and up past the fog and the noise drowned by the distant became almost ~~st~~ silent, dreamlike, and he was alone except for silhouettes, pupils, figures staring at him, everyone was looking at him or for him. He did not know what floor to stop at, he could only guess, and so at one point he stopped and went back in using a hallway window. Now he moved softer, as softly as the boots would allow, and tried to calm his heart, his breathing, silently cursing them for their noise when he was straining to hear. This was impossible, how would he find her among all these rooms, ~~who~~ felt responsible. He needed to save her. It was his only mission now where before he had none. William had unlimited resources at his disposal and was now unleashing them. He wouldn't have long. They could probably scour this building in a matter of minutes, what for him would take ... hours? If they had her then all they had to do was wait for him. He felt uneasy. The entire building could be full of Kops or ... ~~as~~ things waiting to pounce, wear him down, ~~as~~ as if he wasn't already tired.



What was he doing? He did not want to admit that he didn't know what that was. He wandered uncertainly from door to door. Was this the right level and even if it was, how would he know which apartment? Perhaps he would look for an arm shaped whole in the wall and then test it with his own arm to see if it fits, he thought wryly. Great, a fool's errand, and the adrenaline slipped away from him, the helmet felt constraining so he took it off and his armor sank back to oval plates. He suddenly felt jumpy, weary, sluggish and wiped some hair and sweat back from his eyes. Up another level — and then? He peered out hallway windows and on the stairwell, but they revealed nothing except that he was high up in an unfamiliar building that was familiarly poor and broken down. The lamps flickered unsteadily, one blink away from going out completely. The walls were undecorated except by scars in the raw stone and, darkly humorous to him, there did happen to be holes to, presumably empty apartments. The omniscient television filled his ears like a word of God, delivered on high from Central to turn everyone against him, tune them to William's ends, whatever those happened to be. Strange that one could want him dead or torn apart and know absolutely nothing about him. Well, almost nothing. Did he know, he must, that he was not related to Lilee? It was interesting that he looked more like her than him, but no, that was stupid because he was an orphan and that was mere coincidence, what attracted her to adopt him in the first place before she decided that was a mistake. A mistake named no one from the beginning yet saddled with incredible tech, this did not make sense to him — did it make sense to Bourne?

"Great, you're daydreaming." He jolted back to the moment, he really had gone into his mind and left a note to his body that he was out for a thought lunch. He had made it halfway down another hallway, depressingly similar to all the others and thus had no idea how many he had explored, whether he had gone up or down, or even how much time he had spent. Why didn't anyone decorate their doors? It was the same drab, dyed wood over and over in various shades, severely faded in most, so that they appeared utterly homogenous. Only one or two were new, conspicuously bright, due to replacement after a bust but these were extremely few since, if someone was busted here they usually never returned, or could much less afford a new door. If anything the hinges were patched in more awkwardly, just enough to keep the door hanging. These were loose teeth in an endless rotten maw, watchers with mouths on the inside, devouring themselves.

"Look, if I can find you this easy then —"

"How did you get away? You were going the other direction."

"I used another bridge."

"So fast? There's no way you could have caught up with me so quick."

Oneon nodded, "So you're going to look for Nicky too or you just came up here to harass me?"

"No, we need to go, this is serious."

"It is for me, they don't want you, not him, not really." He meant William

of course, his father, and he hoped it would hurt. It did; Bourne's expression creased with frustration and pain.

"You think you're the only one hurting, you're not."

"Good?"

"Good? Alright." Bourne flung up his arms, his scarf flopping, helmet raised in one hand. "Why are you doing this? I mean, I know it's a lot to take, but what is so horrible about us, your family —"

"I'm NOT your family."



"I don't think you'd act any different if you WERE!"

"So you KNEW! You knew I wasn't your brother! And you coddled me while she treated me like shit, you BOTH treated me like shit!" You coddled me while

"I didn't, I swear, it doesn't matter."

"Why? Why doesn't it matter!?"

"What would it change? It wouldn't change you, it wouldn't change this! People would still be coming for you!"

"Me, that's right - ME. Not you. You have nothing to do with me and ~~and~~ I guess you never did. I always said I didn't need your help, because that wouldn't change any of this either. I'd still be hunted and you'd still be the good son!"

"You're letting this go to your head! This ~~whole~~ thing, Onyx, it's not you."

"It is MINE and it is ME, and why do you call it that, Onyx? I'm not a man made of rock and you're just jealous your stupid arm isn't... isn't whatever this is. No, wait, WHY... tell me what Onyx is, if you even know. That's all I want from you, then you can just leave, just run away and go lie to someone else. I swear, everyone says they are helping me but they aren't! Nobody is fucking helping me!" His voice cracked in the strain of higher octaves, louder volume, but he pushed through it regardless, practically rattling the windows.

Bourne shook his head. "No, not here, it isn't safe here!"

"Safe, dammit! Safe?" Oneon smashed his fist into the wall, punching clean through into the apartment. "I'm so so tired of hearing that. NOWHERE is safe. And since we're shouting anyway... NICKY!" He bellowed her name, staring his foster brother in the eyes. "Nicky! Can you hear me?"

"Stop that! Stop this and come with me and I'll tell you about Onyx."

"Nicky!"

"Please."

"Nicky! Nicky, tell Bourne to tell me!"

"Real mature, little brother."

"Rgh! I am not your brother, I am NOT BB," he ground out the words, milling then from painful seeds into poisonous dust. He shoved roughly past Bourne, spotting his cycle at the end of the hallway. He kept walking, shouting, and hoping he was ~~not~~ being watched. He kicked the cycle over and heard a rushing run up behind him, clobbered and tumbled to the ground. They rolled over the dirty floor, punching and kicking at each other mindlessly, raging, tantruming. Oneon just wanted to hit him so bad, punch that stupid handsome face that had made him feel so insecure for so long and for no reason. They traded childish insults, calling one another "idiot" and "stupid" and "spoiled" and on and on. Then a light flashed very briefly from the window trailed in a half second by the raygun buzz of a Quick Glider. They rolled away from each other, scrambling for their helmets, armor activating, parting, glaring.

"You don't get to save the day anymore," Oneon said, and continued, interrupting the other just starting to speak: "Goodbye, Bourne. Now get lost."

"But Onyx? You, me, -" Bourne sputtered in the face of Oneon's stern deliverance.

The young man in blue held up his hand to stop him, turned, and ran off the other direction, lightly, jogging, thinking furiously - how to find Nicky?



It was stupid, impossible, irresponsible and irrational to stay and search and subject himself to the oncoming onslaught, willingly trap himself against Bourne's will. In short it was emotionally perfectly human and there was no other choice for him so he put all logic out of his head. When you stop thinking about something or everything then that one thing or all those things are irrevocably attracted to you. Maybe that was a bit of a stretch, that the Universe was bending over to help him, give him a glimmer of hope, because it is, as a whole, entirely indifferent to the plight and not predisposed to provide assistance on bias or reason or any other worth-mentioning attribute that might cause a lady, sentient being to attempt the same. No, instead let me merely intimate that it is a fundamental law of sorts, at our level, that to draw away causes a vacuum to be fatefully filled.

And thus he picked a door with no logical reasoning and bashed it quickly in with his right fist — what time was there but for a single knock — and, without slowing his gait or quieting his gale of yells, ran laps around the unit and its folks who retracted to the edges, his periphery as it were, because only one interested him and her name escaped his lips, barred teeth, wantonly and without abandon for he refused to abandon her and or, stubbornly, to give into the boy, the man, the brother that he had left. She was not there. He didn't slow down, he didn't stop to think, he let himself be led by impulse and it gave him a *deja vu*, a mirror of feeling from earlier when he had jumped off the roof, giving himself over to his inevitable actions. Did that make it fate? This was the wrong floor, he needed to go up.

Glass shattered and armies of tiny crystals marched and rolled into the halls, crushed loudly under jack boots and sliding, scraping, tinkling as stragglers struggled to catch up or perch on broken bergs. They were coming, he did not slow down, but faced ~~the~~ upwards. There were a great many sounds all vying for his attention, their volumes merged, their tones converged, and he heard only his breathing, at the forefront of his senses, the mildest noise became the loudest and he was floating, crashing through units, ignoring families, running through furniture, watching himself yell her name, knowing that he would hear her in spite of this chaos — "Oneo!" It split through the cacophony of swampy white noise and paused his breath. He saw a hole in the wall near the ceiling... she was still up above, right above him. Her scream ended muffled and it arose a rage in him that flashed through him in a visible, crackling ripple that reached his feet, his boots, as his knees bent and he shot upwards, with his cannon, with himself, this body, his entire being smashing through ceiling and floor, reverberations lost in the reflecting sonar of the advancing squad, Quick Gliders, and a distant diesel engine. Chunks of stone and fleshy bits of carpet blasted aside, parted to see him surface and stretch his legs to land squarely above the hole he had created and came through. Scratches on his face, helmet, stinging but unfelt, he cased the room in a steady clockwork arc that ended on a terrified man ~~he~~ gripping Nicky to him, one hand sliding from her mouth in fearful astonishment.

"I - we - I was — trying to - to help," he stammered and immediately faded out of Oneo's adrenalized vision which did not have the luxurious time for passive, ineffectual objects. He ignored him so utterly as to render him entirely invisible and addressed Nicky directly while she still pulled free and called his name as she ran to him.

"Time to go!"

"Where?"

"Up!"

"Up?"

"Up," he grabbed her hand. "The only way — except for down."

"Let's go up." She smiled briefly, tempting the fates with it, without logic or meaning, just relief and a tiny enjoyment of shared experience, a spark of inane humor.

"Right, hop on."

"I can run!"

"You can't jump —"

"You can't jump far enough!" she put her hands on her hips.



"Nicky, please!" The sounds of stomping, huffing and puffing in militant exactness echoed as omnisciently as the televisions and, just the same, louder from below where red lines appeared, waving, and crossing through the hole in the floor. She hopped on his back in one quick flog and had hardly righted herself before they were off and he was running, banging through the door without stopping, basing no speed on her screams of terror but telling her to hush anyway. "Shut up!"

1/22

Heavily armed and armored Kops appeared around the corner, rifles trained on them, faces obscured by faceplates, glass, and the anonymity of dangerous foils, mortal foes, obstacles to escape. They ~~went~~ went to their knees as others stayed standing and carefully aiming began to fire — or would have had Onean not fired first. The corridor flashed in brilliant electric blue and white that sizzled, crackled, and left a thumping reverberation in the river of fiery wake. Nicky screamed, she shouted words, a word, "don't" or "no" but it was all too much to really get a hold on and he was merely mowing down their mortal enemies, bushwacking, blazing a trail to freedom, the outside, a chance of disappearance. He may have tried to hit them in superficial places as well as the weapons themselves, but to be honest he was more concerned with stopping them first and foremost — and staying alive in the process. It all seemed to be getting out of hand, so to speak.

He dashed past the pile of crumpled people, nimbly jettling around the corner and sprinting as fast as he could up the stairs. The weight on his back offset his balance and he had to exert extra effort not only to keep up the pace but also to maintain his balance. He needed to get somewhere to think, plan, and these guys just kept coming at him. He suddenly wished they would leave him alone so he could enjoy what he had rather than trying to protect it from harm. What good was a treasure if having it only means keeping it safe, keeping it yours? Safe-hay, well this certainly wasn't safe, but he did feel better not being trapped in lock-up, even for good intentions, anywhere.

Up stairs, around stairs, the only direction that came to him, he would no longer fall, no, he had to go up. If only he was alone, lighter, he knew he could get away. Instead he bore a burden upon his back that jostled and clung and was the only thing right now that he wanted to keep. If they got out of this, he would be better to her, for her, tell her things, and hopefully avoid Bourne entirely. In order for that to happen he had to stop this and that meant stopping William, dead. So he climbed the watcher towards its crown, for a way out, for perspective, he couldn't breathe while he was in here — they must get out.

Frequent buzzing passed by outside and he knew the gliders were circling, they were all planning to snare him, shoot him, and spare no expense in doing so. The justification of fighting terrorism allowed this madness to escalate, unabated, an army sent to mark and take him, one boy.

"They'll all be on the roof waiting for us!"

"I know!"

"Then why are we going there?"

"Where else can we go?"

"Hide!"

"No, it won't work."

"I don't want to die, Onean," she sobbed, shaking, threatening to topple him, muscles spitting acid and each step flaring then in pain, his chest ached, his left arm felt numb, and he was heading straight to the firing squad.

"You won't, I won't let them hurt you."

"How? I mean, you promise?"

"Yes." Why had he promised? How could he keep that? How indeed. Why had he taken her? He had come to see her for no rational reason and now she was his charge and in perfect danger. He regretted not planning, not listening to people who wanted to help, and for giving in to his immediate emotions and desires. Oh how he wished he could have another chance to try this all again, desperation took hold but he stubbornly clung to the non-plan of a rooftop escape.



This boring, dead city was now alive and turned against him. It was turned in on itself, on him, antibodies attacking a malignant tumor that still called this place home, no matter the mutual dislike, even hatred. There was no one to save him, he had left them all behind, now he had to face it all alone. He did not notice the ugly, barren walls and all their minute cracks, scars of past but no excitement, age-inflicted only. The steps were worn and lumpy, also cracked or wholly missing in chunks, also from the banal but ceaseless march of time and toes. The windows rattle in their cheap frames, a thin and ineffective barrier against the seeping, seeking cold and any bullet or boy that might jump through in a leap of faith, which he did not take or make. All these things that he used to take notice of when his life was slow, boring, terrifying, something he had wanted to shed if he could find the courage and now it seemed impossible to hold onto, regardless of the power. He cursed Bourne for wasting his time, Lilee for lying to him, and Sam and Ron just for good measure. He always figured on falling to the end, not rising to it, but he would not go quietly into the night, or rather, the very early morning.

There was a chain across the door to the roof — there was a chain. Oneon burst out into the sunlight of spot lights, buildings covered in kops like ants, gliders whizzing all around — prototypes they had been working on, and ~~the~~ portable sentry guns sat like gargoyles on the lips of buildings, at the edge of unused gardens that had become hairy jungles of weeds and sticker bushes. What a sight, a boy with a girl clinging to his back, scraped up blue armor and cycle helmet, one arm across his chest and the girl's knees, the other outstretched and ending in a cannon. He did not slow down, but he did begin to yell over the loudspeaker voice ~~the~~ commanding them to HALT and LIE DOWN and all that.

"Is THIS what you want!?" He practically screeched, pulling it close to his face and stretching the physiological muscles that allowed him to use it. A ~~low~~ wavering line shimmered down his body and Nicky gasped. He leaved all his might inward and pulled his willpower in this arm to ~~the~~ bare.

"Put the girl down ... lie face down on the ground..." A scratchy voice was still booming but Oneon would not listen, he did not hear it. He smelled his own sweat but no fear and waited for the kind of bullets to hit his body. He couldn't see for all the lights, he squinted with teeth clenched, and ran, ran the tired muscles that grappled his tired bones underneath his tired skin. He was a fleshy bag of acid, aching, numb, exhausted, and alive, still alive until they shot him or...

A net caught them and they tumbled into a heap, scraping and bumping until coming to a stop, so close to the edge of the roof which might as well have been a million miles away, around the earth several times, or in outer space. It was impossible, had been impossible and he thrashed anyway, cutting himself free with a blade of light frozen at the end of his arm, the metal cords hissing angrily as the melted in shreds away from it. Nicky was sobbing, terrified, repeating how he had promised and what would they do, but mostly God. "God, oh God, no..." which sounded peculiar to Oneon, reminded him of Dick, and slowed his raging. Only the backwoods types and conspiracy theorists had any belief in God and magic, but Nicky was saying it over and over and he couldn't shake the impression that she was stupid, an exorcise, and one that he had given his life and this power up for, that would soon be taken from him — all for this person who thought God existed and called out to THAT in their final moments. He was disgusted and simultaneously guilty and ashamed for the very raw disgust he leveled at her. It reminded him of when she had called him BB or asked about Bourne. Why was she even with him now? It was fear and uncertainty, nothing more. He was, to her NO ONE, and tears filled his eyes as anger hardened his heart — he felt no pity for this pretty creature. He did not even understand her, but he wanted her so badly that he could not stand to be so near her own sweat smell sticking to him, painting him as her slave boy. No more. He stood up, the net falling ineffectually



from him like spider webs. ~~was~~

Lights illuminated him, his grim expression, and she looked up in renewed terror. "Just like the first time," she stammered, staring, unable to look away. "Your face, Oneon, I'm scared." Voices shouting, a megaphone, boots crossing, triggers ready, guns coked, gliders buzzing. Again all this fell away from them and they were alone.

"You don't need me," Oneon sneered. She shook her head, face flooded, not comprehending, yet seized by a dreadful certainty. She may have pleaded, he didn't hear her. "God will save you." And he turned his back on her, "at least your soul." He finished, only turning his head back to say the words. He was alone, she was with him, weeping, questioning.

"Promised! You promised!" she yelled at his back. He toyed with the rage boiling in him, allowing it to enter his consciousness from painful memories. Every one abandoned him for something else, something better. He wasn't ever a hero or a favorite, just something to hide... or seek. William sought him, part of him at least, and he suddenly had the burning desire to find out more. He knew he could get there, he could ~~use~~ sense the air warbling with his capability, he only needed to unleash it. Tiredness could wait a little longer, first he had to get out of here, get away from her, and find him that wanted ~~him~~ this orphan so badly. ~~The~~ More nets came out of the darkness, wiry maws to swallow them up, but they only hit Nicky, still praying to her God, because Oneon swept out of the way in a series of zig-zagging ~~reflexes~~ and slides.

As soon as he paused, the rain of bullets began, but he did unleash something there and in doing so the lights dimmed and the aim was off as though the dimension itself had been bent by the energy expended. He fired guttural blasts to various points of clustered Kops that churned the air with electric zeal and detonated on impact with ear-ringing explosions of white and blue that sizzled with Tesla strands of lightning. People yelled and flew up in the air and fell, some fell far below, but Oneon was not watching them. He pinned the sentry guns one by one, one after the other, and they popped and fizzled like soda cans filled with fireworks, burping barrels and gears and circuits leprously. He was moving too, had been moving, running along the lip of this giant with wasps in its scraggly hair, but now he jumped, pumping hard onto the springy heels of his boots to send him ascending above the entire ~~the~~ scene, high over, and landing on a building one over, that is over one entirely, and he kept running.

He did not glance back, he just ran. Once he was below, outside, and now he was up and above and tired, driven, driving his legs forward, whipping them with determination. He thought he saw pursuit in his periphery but he did not stop, he intended to outrun and so he crossed weedy gardens, ran over pedestrian bridges that skimmed the fog level, and dipped down into that mist to its thickest, eventually stopping in some building, somewhere, and he realized he did not know what direction he was going... and his stomach was insisting on a snack break.

At the bottom level, scaling as quietly as possible down the building, he found a closed up bar and broke inside. It seemed he had been running for days and an instant, but either didn't matter as long as know one knew he was here now. He sat on a counter in the kitchen and ate pickles out of a jar with one hand, gnawing on a block of cheese from the other. For whatever reason, ~~these~~ these were the foods he desired most right now though he doubted his digestive system would approve. He didn't care, he just sat and devoured the vinegar and dairy delights methodically, impassively, a statue on a counter top, a kitchen device with only that purpose and doing it ~~very~~ very well indeed. Alone with pickle, alone with cheese. The right hand did not know what the left was doing and the left did not recognize the right hand, they were strangers feeding a common master who, due to the sheer immensity of reality and crushing loneliness, relied entirely on his body's instincts to refuel itself — for his mind was asleep or dormant or at most not processing in particular. There was too much for that while there was procrastination to be done and pickles to consume.



Maybe he waited twenty minutes or his body simply knew when he was properly fed, a motherly instinct dotting on the lost, violent orphan, but in any case he was sated and stopped and sat, cross-legged on the shiny metal counter, a dish of darkness, sweaty sweatshirt, matted hair, and salty brown light brown skin. His helmet and gloves, or glove, lay nearby, gracefully set down before the feasting had commenced. Absently, for he was taking a break from the world altogether, he ran his hand over his face and brushed back the hair that immediately returned to its comfortable placement down his brow, blocking his eyes. Gray blue eyes; he liked them to be blue but people often told ~~them~~ him they were gray or lied to his face and said they were green. What people? Where were they now? Happy Birthday, you get a gun, he thought, thoughts now arising again, taking shape from the first bits of energy one can draw from such a meal. Don't forget a side of pickles and cheese, he forgot the cake, this rogue birth in his head continued, runny, silly, and entirely appropriate for the circumstance.

The lid went back on the big, restaurant-sized jar, ~~the~~ the cheese was wrapped, and he sighed heavily but did not get off the counter. God. God? What the hell was that about? It was a silly old fairy tale that died out with myths and the Flood of Fire that precipitated the Collapse and many then called the Apocalypse, but it wasn't. ~~He~~ They all learned that. It was simply the natural end to all the greed and earth-sucking avarice that powered the old world that this new city, built by the fathers of science, tried to ape so damn much. God was decadence and cruel faith in a being or a concept that could not be proved so it was dropped entirely from a race now more interested in survival for its own sake and not a spiritual end. The soul could not be proved either whereas the better science they got, the longer they lived and isn't that the important thing? Anyone who has considered an outlet in suicide might disagree. If it was better to have loved and lost than why worry about extending what happens after that or, horrible thought, living a long, healthy life devoid of love. O'nean did not believe in love, he decided, otherwise it would be tangible, self-apparent, describable... it should have saved and freed him, then, her... oh well, he sighed deeply again. God. God. Damn it was the only phrase acceptable in contemporary society that had that word and effected no loss of respect. The Children of Science had no patience to entertain beyond that, and the phrase itself was more an <sup>artificial</sup> artifact, ~~and~~ an affectation for retro cool that called to mind simpler, better times when man ruled the entire world. Such cool ideas never made much sense to O'nean, but he was never cool. Still, how ~~was~~ it that something nonsensical could be used to social advantage by those who put ~~in~~ stock only ~~in~~ in concepts that made sense. Sense, hell. How did THIS make any sense? The city was losing its mind chasing one small fly, a spect, a nobody, ~~no~~ no one. Well, he wasn't no one anymore, he was definitely someone, he just didn't know who. It would be terrible now to die and not know who he was — he would haunt them as a ghost. William. William knew everything and he was angry about it too. The thought ~~of~~, the fancy rather, of buttering up that madman who was also Bourne's father gave him a taste of dark satisfaction.

He heard something, indistinct, and slid off the counter, glancing around. Ugh, he had stiff joints from sitting still. He stretched and yawned. A clock said it was past 5, this place wouldn't open for another few hours. Bars opened at 8 and really he didn't blame these people who drank that early, he might have too if he was old enough. And all people did, even the hoitytoity ones, was eat, fart, drink, play video games, and fuck. Maybe the second to the last was the last, he wouldn't doubt it. This city was a cesspool of very banal distractions, all couped up in one big safe house ~~for~~ keeping their face from disappearing in a puff of smoke off the face of the world, but no one aspired ~~more~~ to more than survival and tangible fun anymore. All the work went into optimizing their current comforts and conveniences. Where was the science to save their souls, or at least a science of art.



Date: 23 JAN 2013

Well, so here we come to it, the middle of the story and our hero, if we may call him that after his actions, is inexplicably involved with feeding himself and pondering said actions but none too deeply, as we always (almost) as a matter of course, because that would constitute focusing inward on things outside ourselves, and in that vein Oneon is only considering himself. This is not intended as blame or defense, merely perhaps an opportunity for the reader to recognize some common ground since it must be said that this sad, angry unruly boy has quite gotten away from the author as well, and I have my doubts as to whether he is up for the challenges ahead of him. He must be, of course, or we cannot come to a satisfactory conclusion, rather we might end tangled in the wilds of his insanity. It is too much to hope for and therefore let us not hope, for he does not, and merely root for him or follow out of morbid curiosity. Some end will come, I assure you as it comes to us all, and I cannot say whether he or you will like it, but only that it does, maybe it must. Anyway, I will now terminate this strange respite on the very special page of 101 of this first, quite rough draft, and we will return to our special boy, in a kitchen, in a bar, in Core City... hunted.



Date: 23 JAN. 2013

Oreon sensed someone was there, that he was being watched, but he did not see anything and frankly, did not care. He was no longer afraid of voyeurs turned into enemies, he had defeated dozens of kops and everything William had thrown at him, what was one more... or two, three, heck as high as he could count. This isn't to say he wanted to fight, no, not right now — his vision was no longer tinted by red rage and he wistfully thought of days he stared in bed too long and had considered them wasteful, adding to his depression. He would lie awake, staring at the ceiling, memorizing its texture, and telling himself he should get up, he had to, but not heeding his words and hating himself for it. If he did not listen to himself, why should he listen to anyone else? Anyway, he wasn't depressed any more, he felt an odd calm, possibly associated with his plan, determination to see it through, and the sheer simplicity of it — brute force. Or he was in shock, something he dismissed readily, he would know what shock felt like and this wasn't it. No, he was pretty sure it was because he knew what to do and he wasn't afraid to do it, not afraid of anyone, not even his brother. He ho, he would not have to confront him anyway.



Date: 23. JAN. 2013

"Are you proud of yourself, kid?" Sam's voice, a soft but stern Australian accent tickling his ear drums from out in the shadowy main area, beyond the doorway that she stepped briskly into, filling it vertically with her tall frame and tall headdress of a helmet.

"How did you..." Oneon trailed off.

"You make quite a racket and you left the door open, or rather, missing. Does it matter how I'm here?"

"Go away."

She sighed a bit theatrically. "Sulking?"

"No."

"Ah, plotting?"

"Look, what do you want?"

"You, of course, everyone wants you."

"Why me?"

"Because William does."

"And him?"

"That - your arm, you know that."

"Thing, this thing?" He held it up and it twisted cylindrically, funneling into a cannon then reversing to have  
"What is it?"

"You know better than anyone."

"But there are things you aren't telling me."

"I don't have all the answers."

"That isn't an answer."



"You didn't ask a question."

It was Oneon's turn to sigh and he glowered at her. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Your brother—"

"He's not my brother," Oneon said automatically.

"— knows more than I do, or in a different way rather. That," she pointed, "is Onyx which Lilee and William developed jointly while they were married. She had a child, they did that is, and stole both away from him because she feared what is now coming to light: that he's a maniac."

"What about me? Why me?"

"Well, I assume it was safer to augment an orphan —hey, you asked!— with an experimental device and easier to hide since William would be looking for a single son, ~~family~~ single mother family."

"So I'm no one."

"I wouldn't say that, look what you've done to the peace of this city."

"I didn't do anything, they forced me."

"They? Who are they?" ~~Did they~~ <sup>Did they make you leave that poor girl?</sup>

Oneon cringed inwardly but outwardly he kept up a scowl. "Who told you all this anyway?"

"Hassan, well him through Ron, that idiot."

"Hassan's not an idiot."



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"I meant Ron."

"Are you two... uh, ~~do~~ friends?"

"Yes well no, it's not that simple."

"Do you love him?"

She gave him a strange look. "Why would you ask that?"

"Because he says he's going to kill you when you're ready to die. —"

"Oh yeah, that's love all right." She rolled her eyes.

"And yet ~~as~~ I've seen how you look at each other. It doesn't make sense, but I don't think love does either so I thought, I don't know, that you are in love with each other."

"Oh dear, it's ... well it's not that simple."

"You said that."

"Can't I say it again?"

"It doesn't explain anything!"

"Why do you need explanations? Why don't you explain what happened up on that rooftop?"

His face felt hot. "I don't know what you mean..."

"Bullshit, you left your princess and ran."

"I - I had to run."

"Without her? Why did you bring her up there in the first place?"



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"Why should I tell you anything?"

"Fair enough." She stopped, he sagged in his resolve, it must have shown. "She's fine by the way." She added, watching his face.

"How do you know?"

"The same way I knew what you did."

"~~What~~ What does it matter what I do or did?"

"I don't know, DOES it matter?" Silence. He shifted, tried to hold his sour, stubborn look.

"What matters is what we do now."

"We?"

"Yes, we. I'm trying to get you on our side, kid. You see what William is doing, does THAT matter?"

"I don't care."

"Yes, you do, or you will when he takes you apart to get what he wants."

"Let him try, I won't let him."

"You? You alone?" Hell, I would like to see that!"

"Haven't you been watching?"

"This isn't his worst, and he won't stop."

"Then I'll stop him, first."

"Fuck, you're a stubborn little shit!"

Oneon was caught off guard. So much for



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trying to sweet talk him into joining her!

"Well, what the hell do you want me to do?" He asked angrily, heated out of semi-ambivalence, pushed out of conscious discomfort into the offensive.

"Grow some balls or let them drop!" He started at this insult and was about to say something cleverly riposté before she cut him off, continuing: "Come with me and we'll figure out what the next step is, we'll take on William together. It'll be safer." Everything made sense and might have gotten through if not for the last word.

"Safe!" He laughed and shook his head, "no, there is no safe, not for me. You sound like me, you sound like Bourne. You don't understand and it doesn't matter how much I know or care about what's going on. The only way any of it will stop is if I end it, end him, and I know I can, I have nothing to lose."

"And to gain? What do you have to gain by this insane so-called plan you've hatched. I'm all for the element of surprise but you are underestimating our enemy and overestimating yourself. What happens when all these people, the citizens, rise up to stop you which is bound to happen with all the ruckus you've caused and the picture the media has painted



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of us. Huh? What then? Will you gun down innocent civilians the way you gunned down those Kops?"

"Innocent," he snorted. "I have to protect myself."

"Yah? From getting a bloody net thrown on you?"

"What would you have done? They were shooting at us, at me! I don't want to die!"

"That's why I had them fire the damn net!"

He stopped in surprise, "What? What do you mean? Why would you—"

"Not every Kop is out to get you, E has secured the loyal ones, the non-dumbasses who can use their brains and see what is really going on. They've blended in, or are for now, trying to get you on our side."

"How do I tell which ones are which?"

"The ones who aren't shooting at you," she said with a raised eye brow and straight face. "Although I don't think they're supposed to be doing that, not from what I've heard, but those trigger-happy idiots get overzealous and who can blame them with you frying people left and right and flying into fucking space." He didn't say anything.

They stood there, her staring down at him, she was nearly a foot taller without her helmet.



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and he looked at the floor. She must have thought he was considering all this because the resolute visage that took hold of his features caused her a slight reaction of surprise. She unfolded her arms, let them down to her sides.

"You're afraid of me, all of you are," he said to her, into her eyes, his heart hardening against the information which was just more media, meaningless, proofless, and nothing to be implicitly trusted.

"Damn right," she said although tinged with something. Nervousness? Did the great General GET nervous? "The kind of destruction that thing can do rivals what William has at his disposal."

"That 'thing' is my arm, my hand," his voice grew quiet and low, the back of his neck prickled, and he thought he heard a whistle, that damn whistle, his brother's call — why hadn't he been born a bird if he liked to whistle so much. It was annoying and what's more, it gave him away every time. "I see," he said. His arm was a cannon, flaring at its center with an intense light reminiscent of the fluttering lines rippling through him. Pots and pans, hanging from the ceiling began to vibrate, ~~symbols~~ cymbals in a non-existent orchestra. The jar of pickles rumbled right off the counter and smashed into the floor. Pots



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of light, seemingly triangular, angular, but too small to really tell, peeked out from all the nooks and crannies, floating to the beck and call of the thing, Onyx. He held it in front of his face.

"You see?" She stepped back slightly into a warrior stance, placing her hand on the Sunblade sheathed on her back. "What are you doing?"

"Me? You, you are keeping me talking, that's all — you didn't really think it would work?"

"I didn't, he did." She admitted, "Let's just —"

"Bourne?"

"What? No, look let's just calm down now, what ~~are~~ do you think you're doing. I'm not your enemy, kid."

"Then what are you?"

"Call me a friend, I only want what's best."

"For the city. I don't think so. I don't think I can trust you. I'm going to leave, I don't want to hurt you so don't try to stop me — just put your hands down."

She had them out in front of her, placatingly.

"Damn it I'm no good at this talking shit, just please wait, you're making a mistake."

"They're mine to make," he had made mistakes and he loathed himself for it but the last thing



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he wanted was a sermon delivered from on high. For all he knew she believed in fairy tales like Nicky. He... he believed, was beginning to form the belief that he could do what he wanted, make his own destiny and he did not need permission, a guardian angel, love, or even reasons. His actions could be self-affirming and that sounded satisfying to him. "You should have come alone."

"I did," she looked confused.

He stretched out the stiffness, full belly sloshing, boots wet with vinegar, standing in an inland sea of pickle juice and pickle ships, rippling with the power he brought to the room; it began to get louder.

"You don't need to lie, Sam." He moved over to a small window, sideways, keeping his eyes on her, pulling on his helmet and glove, leaving a trail of thin green footprints from the large boots. She watched him with an indecipherable expression and lastly she said almost sadly, "Good luck, Oneon."

He paused. "I don't need it." And with that blasted a hole out of the window itself and a huge section of wall, out into the night, swiftly, poised, a fleeing torch, a guided missile, and everyone now would know or did know the target. When he was finished he would rest. He would find a hiding spot



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and sleep for weeks, or days, and lie there for weeks and he might not be happy then but he would finally be free and isn't happiness overrated anyway? He wasn't sure, he didn't think he had ever experienced it for anything longer than a chemical second of bliss in a moment of elation, but then it was so easy to be above his baseline of brooding, even those moments probably weren't even happy, not technically, not if you could measure them against anyone else's -- because he was NO ONE. Yes, he decided, he had never been happy, not even when he got to kiss that stupid girl, but it did not matter because it hadn't stopped him. The city wasn't his oyster, it was his jar of pickles, and he felt he could do anything now. And maybe that wasn't happiness, but it was what everyone else wanted, and this thought of power gave him a high that he stroked and tended, punching it as if he were fluffing a pillow, and letting it saturate his rage that helped him sustain the power. Those were his friends, and he had always had them.

At school he had made friends, but was never very close to them. They were other outcasts, unsoul for various reasons that bound them to



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brotherhood by social caste rather than genuine interest in one another. They were, for the most part, awkward nerds interested in things he had no interest in. Even though science was a big deal, and technology played a huge part in the success of Core City, more perhaps than tenacity or even basic ingenuity, it would forever constitute the bottom rung of a social ladder heavily influenced, or infected, by burgeoning hormones bursting at the seams. The primary focus was in the century-past western style: sports, girls, and bullies. Basketball reigned supreme and there were both minor and professional clubs operating in the city. It was a sport that was well-contained and portable, as well as with the arenas themselves. It had evolved to include more physical contact and had become a much rougher dance, but this was inevitable with the decline of more violent sports and the continuing necessity to have an outlet for violent tendencies, or rather testosterone-fueled activities not, per say, direct or malicious attacks. Bourne excelled at this, that is the game, and Oneon could not believe he was the gentle soul he pretended to be based on the devastation he caused on the court, he absolutely dominated and everyone loved him. He had already been popular before, but it took on a whole new dimension when he entered high school. By



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the time Oneon got there, he had no chance — he hadn't even wanted to play that dumb sport in the first place but now everyone expected him too ... and fail. He refused to give them the satisfaction of a pathetic second-fiddle, a side kick to the scarlet scarfed star, his signature clothing, and did not join the team. This did not engender him to the jocks who called him a coward to his face or ~~by~~ the teachers who implied it by telling him he wasn't applying himself or those so-called friends who idolized his brother and called Oneon "BB". He didn't care, they could have him ... back at school. He wouldn't be going back would he? How could he and what would be the point? He didn't lament losing the losers, leaving them behind, and he had never learned anything worth a damn. No, he was free of that as well, not that there was ever a question of it, it was silly to even think of that time in his life, because it may as well have never existed, he was so different now.

He kicked a can, it bounced several times off dark walls, echoing down this empty hallway parallel to an alley, breaking, momentarily, his sneaking silence. He had never been great at consistency, maintaining a rhythm and it had kept him out of



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music where his physical weakness had kept him out of sports. Not that he didn't have some talent in the 'neo soccer' but he had none with guitar which is why he hadn't been able to learn it even though he tried — sort of — on his own, using lessons he copied from the screens of public computers. It was too hard, he couldn't read the music, he probably copied it wrong and he didn't want anyone to tell him how to do it, he wanted to learn it his way, in his own voice. Then one day a kid, a bully, they were all bullies in their own way, even the bullied wimps; anyway he saw what Oneon was scribbling in his notebook and ridiculed him for it, calling him a "rock star" and teasing, asking for a song, a private concert, groupies... Oneon stopped messing with that stupid guitar after that.

But he kept playing neo-soccer, sort of. This was basically the same as the old western soccer, or football as it had also been known, except for the addition, or rather the subtraction of fouls. Rather than being due to the outlet for aggression, this may have more to do with the looseness of it and the fact that there was no one to referee... there wasn't really an audience, no clubs, no sponsorship, and all this had to do with the fact that the only fields, ~~grass~~ grass fields, large enough were lots littered with trash and NO TRESPASS-



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ING signs and trash — or outside the city. That is, the game was played illegally, and many of them ended just as unofficially: when they were too exhausted to keep playing, there was an argument that could not be settled, or the Kops — who always knew this was going on — decided to be jerks and break it up.

Oreon liked soccer because he was naturally good at it, mostly, and this always surprised everyone else present. It didn't seem to matter how many times he made a goal or stole the ball or dribbled in down field with pursuit too far behind to have any efficacy — no, they were always surprised. His reward was to be kicked, on purpose, or shoved to the ground, and this was yet another reason they did not have rules against fouls, because it was then a very legitimate thing to disable a sleeper star whether he actually had the ball or not. Often enough he did poorly just because they kept him from getting possession in the first place and would make sure he had a position which ~~gave~~ nearly guaranteed he would not have the limelight. He hated it and their petty jealousy. There ~~was~~ were talks about a real league and sanctioned games outside the city



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due to the recent peace, but he knew they'd never allow him. They couldn't handle this small, quiet, sullen boy to diminish any of their precious thunder. Nobody ever let him do what he wanted and now there was nothing they could do to stop him — not that he'd be able to play soccer. Oh imagine, a game with these boots? Rules would arise, the boots would come off, but what could they say against his arm, just another age-grow limb, then BAM a cannon or a power fist or maybe he could make the ball stop in mid-air. ~~or~~ And he thought, with a flush of fantasy ~~adrenaline~~ adrenaline, about hitting those big, dumb brutes right in their mean faces as they tried tripping him — how glorious! Satisfying! If only he could go back in time and do that. Talk about surprise!

Now he wanted to run through these narrow streets of darkened buildings, punching and kicking the walls, scaling them as easily as strolling down the walk — but he was committed to staying as unseen as possible. The armor seemed to help, it absorbed the light, drank it in and reflected nothing, an opaqueness as thick as velvet covered his body in blue that he draped in early morning shadows — that early morning that precedes even the hint of morning, this was the darkest before dawn, but did that mean dawn was the first hint of light



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that diffused, dusty stuff that came from everywhere and nowhere? Wasn't it the peeking sun that made damn what it was? Yet either way, neither would find him in the cramped streets that laced ~~the~~ off-avenue between the towering, yawning, stretching structures that could not see down to young Orion and yet would unwittingly, regrettably, thankfully shelter him from the coming dawn's fingers that would only thread the tops, a rosy hand caressing the stone mane, pressing in the fog until it left, disappeared, magically of its own accord—driven back under bridges, subterranean aquifers and hydroponic gardens. Orion didn't like the diffused light brought through in the mist, he didn't look forward to it. It was too bright and skipped his eyes from all sides, he hated squinting. Yet again it wouldn't matter while he stayed in these narrow capillaries where there weren't even sidewalks, although that term meant something else in the post-Collapse Core City since the streets were all one level and the number of cars could be counted on one hand, if even that many existed—only the government knew, William knew. But no, people still walked on the sides that indicated their direction and left the middle up for the occasional cycle.



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the many bicycles, and of course the trams if there happened to be a cable rail — but most of those were underground. It would have been easier to stay hidden down there, the trains were running very infrequently at this hour — or should be — but the thought of going down there made Orion physically ill and he pushed it out of his mind. Instead he would just keep sneaking near the surface, a tumor on the move, a clot seeking the brainy William, Central, it was difficult to get lost even though he never had been in this area before. He carefully listened at doors, popping their locks with one metal finger if they didn't open already, wherever he was they didn't have very good security. In any case he did have trouble figuring out, from where he was, if Central still lay in the direction he supposed and heading out to a main street to see the signs, it opened up his eyes to learn he had been going towards the destroyed sector, Lilee's first grave, and the grave of many others who did not find a bed and maybe wouldn't ever be found — not in time anyway. He was a mere block or two and the fog was extremely thick already — that stinky cloud that concealed a crater, he had been too long in the mist of his mind, of the past, of things that no longer mattered in the



slightest.

Now he faced the cloud of reality, if reality could be defined by what one absorbs through his senses. The unreality of his predicament was only elevated by the ephemeral state of this vision, red and blue and white lights pulsing in the fog, a huge alien being, or the insides of one, crawling with shadowy figures. Some moved in lockstep, jackboot patrols. Others stood, or were fragments of the building corpses, wirey rebar and slabs, scarecrows in the dark, silhouettes of humans idle, we see what our brain tells us we see not always what is there, not always what is. Reality is not the concept of it we hold in our minds, nor was it here for him, but he could not conceive what they were all still doing here, so many, when the rest of the city was empty, hiding, or looking for him. Small groups of people stood around with hard hats, holding onto walkie-talkies or gesturing or nodding, hands on hips, one hand on hip, rocking uncomfortably in the extended time of standing doing nothing. If they could merely sync up instantly, no one here would have to stand and listen and nod for so long. Not when they were so tired, too tired to be scared of the threats the television was warning everyone about. Too



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tired to care who was in charge or why — or how. Too tired to question, analyze, or dig deeper than the bodies tucked safely into the rubble. What was the body count of such mass destruction within a sector of mass creation — masonry speaking — and a hot bed of medical attention for the poor and needy, but weren't the poor always the needy? Sometimes, the poor and the greedy, but no one can fault the hobo for clinging to what he thinks he can get for himself.

Oneon drifted through the pungent damp, the smelly cloud sticking to his face, boy it sure was powerful here and there seemed to be no end to it, would it ever stop? He saw cranes, he heard them digging into the rock and flesh and mess of debris, prying, poking, a search and rescue on a cadaver of tumorous citizens. William may have set out to destroy one, but he wiped out instead a large portion of the city's destitute, at least the old, sick, and infirm — not to mention all the bleeding heart professionals who wasted away here, laboring for compassion and ideals, climbing down the career ladder for thankless karma, do gooding, a bank account full of the best intentions and no money. This was the antithesis of so much of the city's workforce which threw money at these problems in the name of charity while simultaneously decrying



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the incessant increase in taxes. It was so easy to complain when one did not dirty their hands, when there was time and luxury to use as a soap box. Perhaps labor and far off dreams kept the personnel from complaining, or they were working off past nightmares, sins, and their stories weren't worth publishing except ~~for~~ for the occasional sentimental tear-jerker. Onean didn't know what the solution was, or if there was a solution, or if this was the solution. Maybe people couldn't be cooped up this long and it was an advanced form of cabin fever or maybe it was just human behavior, and inevitable. Did the atavistic covetting skew the perfection of the ancients? Afterall it led them here, every rise precipitated a fall, and every fall...

As long as he avoided getting too close to voices or lights then he was invisible, more invisible physically, but less symbolically than he had been up until now. A wanted man, wanted boy — what was he? He felt he had grown up and put away childish things, just look at these thoughts about his city. His senses were cluttered and cloyed here but his mind wandered free, outside of him. It was slow going here, climbing through wreckage, but, well, safe. And gave him a reprieve from paying too much



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attention. He must be getting closer to the middle, the epicenter, because there was suddenly a much brighter light fighting to cut through the curtains of mist, held back like the sun by thick drapes, a great spherical, no it spread out too, was it moving? SNAP! He had just walked through something, he knelt and picked it up — police tape. Strange that he'd find it here, so far in, but there must not be enough to surround the entire perimeter. ~~A~~

"You can't be in this far, ah — look what you've done!" An outline in front of the angry orange glow scolded. "Watch where you're going!" Yes, the light did seem angry, too bright, and it seemed to move.

"Sorry," he said, confident that he couldn't be seen clearly. "I was just trying to get through."

"Nope, no going through. I'm going to have to ask you to move back. What party are you in?"

"Whh..." The outline got closer, a shadow taking corporeal form, back to the light and passing through the veil before Oneon could think.

"Hey!" Oneon froze. "Kid, this isn't a playground and I'm too busy to babysit." He bent down to grab the tape. "Can you find your way out of—" He saw Oneon's boots, armor plates, shit! He reached for the radio on his chest but Oneon rushed up



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and kicked his hand away then spun around, landing his other foot in his ~~face~~ mouth. The man let out a muffled cry, falling backwards towards the glow, and smacking his head on a rock, blood and spittle oozed out of his mouth. Oneon could barely see, that damn glow ruined his sight, but he bent down and saw he was still breathing, raggedly. He yanked him into a flatter position.

"Yo Sid, where'd you go?" The radio crackled, voice jumping on Oneon, causing him to drop the man, Sid, in mid-yank; he dropped with an awkward flop to the ground. "Shit, come on you lazy bastard, we got more patching problems that won't fix themselves. Did you piss on ~~an~~ a hot wire or something?" Stop. Crackle. "Seriously dude, let go of your junk and..." But Oneon was moving again and did not hear. He went on towards the glow, why not?

Sulfur, heat, it felt like brimstone and he imagined the myths of hell made real and he was making right for it. Wouldn't Nicky just ~~the~~ love this? She would compare him to Dante or some other storyteller, but he wasn't there to visit anyone. Lilee would be here, he had sent her, and soon William too. Bourne would end up here, but he had no



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desire to be the one to send him, that idiot would send himself, as he, Oneon, did too. He told himself he was going through it to save time, & words of thought that clung to him in sweat, his sweat-shirt must wreek. A cool pool, a cold shower never sounded so swell, because he rarely got a hot one—usually lukewarm which was worse than either extreme. A lukewarm, fatty ~~shower~~ shower. In some places in the city, other poor ones of course, he heard there were heavy iron deposits which ~~made the~~ gave the water a blood taste and stained the facilities as if they'd been used and abused by a covent of vampires. He really was walking towards the sun, it seemed he was surrounded by it, blinding him, and suddenly he... no, it was too surreal. How not to compare this to hell? Little fires burned fitfully around him, but their pitiful soups were drowned in a slow, scraping gurgle of molten rock eating away at the ruined canal edges, sewer pipes, and chewing thoughtfully on the chunks still resembling buildings. Where the lava met the canals ~~and~~ steam hissed out fitfully, constantly, angry, smelly poltergeists rising up into the freezing cold, the frosty, Autumn morning, but it was far, far from that temperature here, a firey desert inside the oasis.



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Oreon stood in a bubble of heat, the air around him shook and rippled as the reverse eye of a hurricane, calm but active and enclosed by layers of cool standing precipitation, armies of tiny drops sent out in marching sheets to quarantine the awesome site of white hot hissing magma, lava, molten rock and buildings and bodies. The foundations of one building reached pathetically into the sky, its jagged top slipping from the failing grasp of clouds as it sank methodically into its doom, going quietly to rejoin the mother material, broken glass jeering at him, vacant eyes flickering with malicious hollowness, instruments of living cast aside and dangling, clothes and toys and wire half-fallen from the watcher's last sight, burst eyeballs or food in teeth, it appeared to him gruesome and discontent.

Figures dancing in the wavering air moved about with some vague purpose to corral this disaster, force these bowels back into the earth. Oreon lept onto the tooth of a ruin, snagged on red ~~and~~ gums inflamed, that sinking thing. He marched across its diagonal surface, walking upwards against the ~~angle~~ angle. It did not noticeably speed up its dextending demise. ¶ Now everything else is falling, the city itself is being swallowed up, and how long before this spread, before all the consumers ~~it~~ were completely consumed. It really



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was a testament to the efficiency of the media, its hold on the citizens' consciousness, that this had not leaked, that this lava leak had not caused mass panic, riots in the streets, last ditch efforts to accumulate before mass exodus. Or maybe they would stop it, rebuild, and no one would ever know, be the wiser. He looked at the heaving, hissing crawl of liquid and could not fathom how such a thing could be stopped, its persistent, inexorable push to freedom, the heart of life in a non-living substance, animated death of inanimate pieces. It ran its own course and then later, perhaps much later, would start again when rebirthed by heat once more.

He felt wilted, overwhelmed and knew he could not last going over this stuff. It ate his oxygen even as it cursed out his sweat, his body felt sticky and rubbery, neck hardly enough for a head full of coals, and his legs tremored, dizziness crept over him as he crept through this dying, sinking sector. Jumping had been a bad idea, coming through the middle too, and why would it have mattered how unpredictable it was — he probably wouldn't be a match for a fly at this point. He swore at his rash stupidity but now he was in the thick of it, dragging his sweaty mess through a swamp of fire, and there was nothing for it but to push on through to the other side. The other side



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where coolness waited his crossing. He had to make several more jumps, each one more delicious than the last though perhaps each one shorter and he couldn't tell if ~~his~~ his perception stretched then in his dehydrated madness or if the islands he hopped to were actually, subtly moving, underneath him, before and after. Was it rocking back and forth or was it just imbalanced equilibrium? Was someone shaking the camera? ~~or was~~ He thought of playing the floor is lava as a child and how ridiculously literal that was <sup>here</sup> ~~now~~, some childhood skills applied directly now. All it needed was a waterfall of lava, a lavafall as it were, and in the nature of such thoughts and coincidences what followed wasn't surprising - it was morbidly funny and Orion gasped out a bursting, cynical bark of a laugh as he stared into a gaping sinkhole that he stood at the edge of. A lavafall right there. All there needed to be, to complete the picture, was some kind of floating object, raft, boarded by an ill-fated sacrifice, martyr, evil-doer, or two dogs and a cat. He laughed at the transposed imagery but for all he knew it was all a hallucination or all real. The heat wasn't a wall because he was inside the wall, he was a part of it so it couldn't crush him, but the mental state of a mass of heat is not so lucidly



human and more is, that is — it is, it does not do, so it has no need of concepts of fear or movement outside itself. Likewise, Oneon now passed through the rest of this being, a flick on an eye, a cell in its churning plasma body of vibrating air, melting membranes and destructive osmosis. He was flying in a sense, if he were a man, but in this he drifted, shifted, and pieced himself to other areas like a single color of a Rubik cube. Had he fainted? Were these spots before his eyes? No, those were his hands, he removed them, leathery things that they were becoming, why one was already granite, sparkling, winking at him as though the precursor to his polymorph to pure obsidian statue. ~~The~~ Black, sooty black, white, seering white, and tinges of gorey red filled the expanse of his vision, salt tears in his eyes, parched in his throat, and itchy, stinging wool in his ears and nose. He must be crawling, he felt it on his knees, the hot ground that felt so cold, scraping his palms as he scraped along, driven still by momentum and he hoped, vaguely, in a sense, that he was going somewhere, getting somewhere, and not moving in this muck for the hell of it. His consciousness slid precariously between outright ~~the~~ high and blackout dizziness. Strange, slippery stone, so, something else and he was pretty sure it WAS cold on all his nerves



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were utterly burned out and every sensation was now a figment of his mind. Would it really be a figment then? Couldn't his mind make things real or did their reality exist apart from it? He wanted to feel minty cool and eat figs; had he ever had a fig or was he thinking of dates? He hadn't even been on a date, unless that counted, running up the stairs with Nicky, a date on the go, starting with a kiss, misinformation, misunderstanding, and then abandonment. Abandoning. Abandoned, he was and he did. And now ~~the~~ he was in hell for it. How perfect, yet, wait... this wasn't imagination, this was some kind of pipe that he shimmied along. He brought his focus to bear, outside, concentrating on the sobriety of reality and looked, really looked around at where he was, what he was on — yes, a big pipe, large enough that he could only subtly feel it curve beneath him.

He looked back and saw it end in a bendy, twisty blow out that held its agonized slope even as lava oozed from it. From it! He knocked on it with his right hand and they felt... similar, some kind of metal but not filled with minute sparkly bits, just dull, dark gray. He shook his head as a welling up of threatening dizziness caught



him and wiped the sweat from his... no, this was not! It was all over and around him, he had reached the edge, somehow. He opened his mouth and breathed in the slightly sulfuric, miniscule droplets, trying to coat his insides, quench his thirst in breathing. He had never appreciated this floating fast water as he did now and he giggled at the thought of it actually being farts and having been ignited by the lava; drinking it, he would pop like a balloon. He laughed, a nutty laugh. Suddenly hands grabbed him and he struggled against them, trying to find his strengths to get away, get free.

"Easy, son, we got you," a man in a harness said, dangling from a line. The pipe ended, ~~at~~ the top did, sticking out of a cliff of rough earth and stone. This man had appeared from up above, street level, up in the clouds. Oneon let himself go limp, felt his helmet tugged off, and heard comments about that and his strange shirt - probably just a volunteer, then, no one that had seen armor. Water touched his cracked lips and he drank greedily ignoring the advice to take it slow. He wanted to yank it away, the water source, was it a bottle? He was too weakened to do that or even figure out where it came from so he gave up with a sigh.



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and let it dribble down his throat.

He was rising as the water fell, but he kept his eyes shut and felt the darkness roiling. His cracked lips tried to smile at the wonderful sensation but they only split, bled, and caused him to grimace. At this point he could care less where they were taking him, what they would say, or any number of answers. The only answer he sought for now was lower temperature, much lower. The fall cold no longer was bitter, it was sweet and the heat was bitter, bitter at losing him to bite at with its curved fangs. His nose felt hollow, he sucked air with his mouth, and his ears rang with the loss of all that hot wooden atmosphere that dissolved like cotton candy. He tasted blood and goopy roughness. His chest now felt tight, strained and he wondered what this had done to his wound there. His arm was not numb. His hair fell in stiff chunks and swung back and forth as they went up, as they swung, rocked, and he was cradled by this stranger, innocently stupid stranger who stared down at him with such genuine concern he could have cried if all his tears had not been boiled away; perhaps a little salt would do. As they neared the street, their destination, where others were holding the other



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end of the cable, he became more conscious and re-determined. These poor charitable fools, risking themselves for a wanted man, no concept of his worth but treating him as a priceless life, ~~not~~ gambling their own. What is the value of one to many when comparing souls? Did they stack up or was there something tangible in leaving one behind, or saving one, was there only value in the act, was a soul an object at all, a life, a construct of biology? Onean didn't ponder too far, he didn't care so much, there were really earthly ~~et~~ tangibles he sought now and these coalesced in his mind from those dark recesses where they had hid from that angry heat. Yes, angry, we call hot things angry and cold ones bitter, friction and stasis, but now he was somewhere in between and eager to be off, eager to not be enveloped in anonymous caretakers whose only ideal in this moment was to cherish the rescue, selfishly revill in the endorphins of their selfish act. The motivation of one end is the tugging of the other.

He wasn't set down, he was hoisted, held aloft in another's arms and lain carefully onto a makeshift cot. "Can you speak? How are you feeling?" He followed this voice with his eyes without speaking, his mouth now closed in a thin line, pressed to bleeding but only a little. He was all eyes and a



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trickle of blood. He blinked, ~~in a~~ <sup>the husk of</sup> a wasp's nest closing and splitting apart, insect paper, paper mache, he must look a fright for such expressions to be shining out, beaming, from their faces. He tried to sit up but a palm on his chest pressed him gently, firmly down. "Just relax, we'll take care of you. What's your name?"

She, it was a she with a square face ~~and~~ a husky voice yet with an unmistakable trace of femininity. She asked him more questions, she had a winter cap on, her face ruddy, her coat dirty, woolen, patched. Her calloused fingers traced his angry skin, bitter skin, and he sensed it near and far, but it did not hurt, he trembled slightly, he did not wince. She gave a smile of relief, "You are lucky to be alive." He wondered if it was luck, he hoped it was something more, something he could rely on, now, he had to go. Her accent was something odd, perhaps Eastern European? What was left of her country? Of any country?

She was an immigrant, a gypsy, and possibly a criminal. Less than a day ago, a lifetime ago, he had been attacked by such types and now they saved him. He sat up, successfully this time, fearful concern registering in her eyes and knit brows.



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"I" The word, not that one letter word even, would come out, he had croaked it. He cleared his throat, snatched a water bottle she offered, and rinsed it, sending a deluge of delicious ... tap, canal? He spit it out in a spray. "What is this?"

"It's all we had, we didn't have time to boil it."

The taste was all over his mouth, mingling with blood and burnt, singed skin, fired guns. He shook his head from side to side to no great effect except the skin on his neck felt taught, tender, and rubbery. He probably looked like a lobster. His hands were reddish, well one was, the other still impassive, sparkling granite, Onyx. If he had shriveled up there, all they'd find was this, was his arm. There were four immigrants, they all watched him and stared at his right arm. To them it would mean he's a rich kid, poor sobs, they would think there's some reward, a ticket to citizenship and a better life. He stood up, grunting, and they did the same, towering around him in their ragged coats and ruddy faces. For a brief moment he was afraid, an irrational childish scaredness of being surrounded by large, adult strangers and feeling small, vulnerable and a liable victim. He had always hated that feeling. He wasn't a victim any longer.



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"I have to go," he said to them, those big, rough, sad faces nodding with knitted brows. But she was shaking her head, ~~so~~ silently, slowly, and she glared at the man who <sup>had</sup> carried him as he handed over <sup>his</sup> helmet. The man shrugged. She sighed and touched Oneo's shoulder.

"I wish you stay," she said.

"I can't."

She nodded softly, eyes closed briefly and sighed again. "If you must go, go now."

He stared at her, then crammed on his helmet, and jogged off into the fog, towards Central, to where he must, where everything drew him, where William waited. His legs felt stiff, arms too, and floppy too, but as he moved into the mist he felt better, stretched, and hoped he was ready. He had been shot, stabbed, beaten, frozen, and fried but that could not stop him. They could not stop him, nobody could. He would put a stop to all of this and take a vacation, ~~at~~ although a warm beach didn't sound particularly enticing now.

Closer to Central the solar windmills had been activated, drawing power rather than producing it, so that the buildings blew away the mist — or tried



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to. Rather it caused movement and moments of visibility but not overall clarity. He decided to go up, he wanted to go up, get off these streets. He jumped back and forth between two buildings to quickly scale them and save his arms some effort. At the top he found himself in a real rooftop garden and he knew for sure that he was in an affluent neighborhood.

The air was fragrant with plants instead of damp sulfur. He could not see the fire pit from where he had come, the fog was entirely too thick, too persistent in keeping its deadly secret. He had gone from hell to paradise. The gardens here were fruit trees, and flowers. Likely the shops at the ground level were a cafe and a florist, they'd have this as their "homegrown" specialties. Did the residents frequent the cafe? Could they afford to eat there? It was a ritzy prospect, Oneon could hardly conceive of it, but they had squeaked by on so little and so much of what they got, beyond rations, was left-overs served up at the sector food bank where Lilee had volunteered, whittling away at her guilt and bad karma while her kids, well her kid and an orphan, practically starved.

Central stood holding its myriad of cable car lines a dozen buildings away topped by a dome structure



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probably twenty floors up from the level he was at. A massive puppet master stringing along distribution centers which in turn connected to the surrounding neighborhood sectors. It was not a great gravestone or tomb, it was a necromancer making them all get up, keeping those giants alive in undeath even as they crawled with an infestation of humanity, persistent, insistent, self-validating. Oneon wanted to snip all the strings and watch the rich, the non-poor, struggle to keep from starving. He wanted to throw rocks at the live. Instead he would settle for killing the king.

One careful, quiet leap after another, the Central came closer. He rested briefly on a building top higher than the one he had been on. He told himself to pull it together, it was almost over, and he had the strength. The question now was whether he would ask any questions of this soft, wily scientist who hid in his fortress while his goons did the work. He had not even talked to this man but once, that one very strange conversation that ended in shooting. Did everything end in shooting? These days, this day, his birthday no less, it certainly seemed to. Huh, was his birthday even real or had Lilee made it up? Were his parents alive? What were they like? They were so indistinct, so inconceivable that any thoughts



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he had were pure fantasy. He continued, mentally counting out the remaining hops, steps, skips and the city melted away behind him in the roiling rivers of fog. Central filled his sight, patrols on balconies near sentry guns, binoculars, scopes, it was sprinkled with guards not exactly coated but he was lucky they hadn't spotted him. Lucky. Bah, what luck had he had except to keep on going, keep on suffering?

He ducked behind a park bench as a spotlight swept over the top of this building, its garden of herbs, strawberries, snow peas, his stomach hurt so he was not particularly hungry yet these were delicacies he hardly had the chance to try before so he ~~was~~ munched some anyway, pondering his predicament and marveling at the ability to grow such things year-round in such miserable circumstances, fog, rain, relentless gray. Kop soldiers prowled the rooftops around Central and he heard dogs now and then, barking for no reason, practice? He didn't want to have to kill a dog, that struck him as barbaric but what to do if one attacked him? Strike that, how the heck was he even going to get in? He certainly wasn't up for another bombastic engagement full of fireworks and falling deaths. He probably wasn't, maybe he was; he sighed and shook his head, neck feeling like it could tear in half. He was now made of paper paper maché boy, a piñata.



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Burnt burrito. He laughed to himself, a guttural crackling, he liked the sound of it better than his boyish hyena laugh, and so he laughed some more. Another moment of insanity, he thought, eating strawberries that the stomach doesn't want, can't go back, no way forward. ~~He was~~ <sup>He was</sup> a rock, an island, trapped between ~~himself~~ <sup>himself</sup> and a hard place. He was sitting, he put his hands on his knees. There is nothing for it but a giant leap of faith, just show up and deal with the consequences. He didn't even have to wait, he heard the door to the stairs open and shuffling militant steps out from it. Now or never. He didn't want to, he suddenly just wanted to sit there and be found, let fate come to him for once. He didn't even want to respond, he lay down on his side and curled up in the soft, damp loam. Let them come. He closed his eyes, the paper of his skin felt deliciously cool against this soil, he breathed in the grass, tasted the forming dew and frost on his lips, and struggled despite himself to listen. He heard a low whistle which caused him a brief shudder but it was not Bourne's tune. No, these were foils not nemesis and he didn't fear them... well, not that he feared Bourne either. He just didn't want him here. His right arm was



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curled under him and for some reason it felt comfortable there, a steely granite chunk of alien technology stuffed under his side, under the mesh of his armor, sweatshirt, and his smelly skin. Hmm, he either didn't smell or he had gotten used to it. He breathed out through his mouth and pulled in through his nose. Well, THAT smelled bad except for the trace of strawberries... drinking pure fart water had not done him any favors.

"Don't move!" A hushed voice commanded him, pressing down on his shoulder, sending a small spasm of pain through him as well as a bit of anger.

"Why are you whispering?" Oreon said almost lazily, eyes still closed, still breathing in the delicious garden.

"Shh!" He felt the hand move slightly, movements of the connected body causing it to shift and rock.

"Aren't you going to cuff me?" He used the same level, bored voice, normal volume.

"Shit kid, be quiet will you?"

Oreon chuckled under the hand. "You sound like Sam." A muffled expulsion of air through nostrils, a returned laugh, quiet, restrained.

"I'll take that as a compliment," the voice said with traces of smile and pride.

Oreon frowned and opened his eyes, "Who are you?" He tried to turn his head but in the periphery it



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was just another Kop in uniform, full gear. He didn't sense the others. "You shouldn't have let your friends go so soon..."

"Don't threaten me, kid; you're lucky we found you."

"Luck, been hearing that lately."

"Yeah well, you're just beyond their perimeter, but no doubt there will be cycling scouts so we can't stay here."

"So why did you say 'don't move'?"

"My friends," he emphasized the word, "are plotting our route out of here. Can you walk?"

"I can run. Besides, I'm not going out, I'm going in?"

"What? In your condition?"

"I was just resting my eyes."

"Sure and I'm dressed for Halloween."

"Who are you again?"

"The name's Tupper, was a Lieutenant, you're Oneon — the boy wonder — right?"

Oneon had to laugh. "And I'm just wonderful, pleased as punch to meet you. I take it you're not working for William?"

"Thank the fates, no. That crazy bastard got a lot of my friends killed or turned against us."



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"Us?"

"Sam, E, others... I suppose we're the 'resistance', although that sounds strange to me after being the ~~ex~~ police for so long — up until yesterday," Tupper mused.

"What do you want with me?"

"Keep you from HIM, first. Honestly, after that I don't know, but you're the prize, kid."

"I'm a piñata."

"What?"

"Nothing ... so, are you going to let me up?"

"Are you going to run?"

"No."

"Okay then," and Tupper removed his hand, he was kneeling and looking out towards central, his other hand held a rifle. He flipped up his helmet's visor to reveal ~~ex~~ hay-colored features and wire-brush eyebrows and mustache. Oneon sat up against the bench. "You look terrible, kid," Tupper said frankly.

"Thanks, you really do sound like Sam."

Tupper nodded, but it was to the voice in his ear. He said a few things, muffled, abbreviated into his radio's mic, and nodded again. "There is a ~~ex~~ party coming, we're going down, try to go around them."

Oneon shook his head, "I'm not going with you."

"Don't be an idiot, this is not the time."



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"Yes, it is the time."

"Don't make me drag you out of here."

"Don't try it, I don't want to hurt you."

Tupper stared at him, mounting frustration. "You know, you already hurt me. I'm trying to remember that you're just a confused boy, but what you did earlier to my brother." He set his teeth, jaw clenched. "Can't you just stop?"

"You want to hurt me, make me pay."

"I do."

"Maybe you'll have that chance, but now, right now, I am going to stop ~~that~~ all this." He stood up and Tupper unkneelt, not much taller than him. His fingers flexed on his rifle, his spare hand on the body of it, and his forehead wrinkled in irritation. In one instant, one smooth motion, Oneon slid on his helmet, activated his armor, and transformed Onyx into a cannon, a shiver and a ripple of energy punctuated the entire change in that one second. Tupper's face relaxed into a mode one might call awe.

"You may just have a chance," Tupper said. He squared his shoulders, lowered his visor, and began speaking into his mic even as he turned to leave. He did not say goodbye.



Spotlights illuminated Oneon as he faced Central. They come from below and above, one finding him and then another, more quickly than he could react and so he stood stock still. Well, that did it; he would just have to be quick. He stepped back into the sanctuary of greenery, towards the little structure on top that led to the stairwell, and flattened himself against the opposite side, watching the lights sweep about, lock on to the corners, and wait to see him again. He hoped they would think he went down the stairs, but then again there were scouts coming up. If he was going to be caught, he preferred it to be out in the open. He waited, he caught his breath, and concentrated only on it, on the handle within and closing his eyes he felt the plants sway. He heard a new breeze outside that of the rushing rivers of fog, a subtle sound unrelated to the coarse and rude churning of the solar windmills. It drowned all that out, he watched it in his mind's eye, set his inhaling to match it, and exhaling. Blackened, breathing, busted up boy. He was readying his own buster, he would bust through before they could stop him, and kill William in his ivory tower of ~~see~~ science and subjugation. He just needed to prepare himself. He just needed... nothing, he needed nothing else. it was time to go.



Suddenly there was sounds of gunfire, lots of it, and all around. The spotlights disappeared in a jolt and the noise of full-on warfare rose in a disjointed opera, screams, bangs, thrumming, booms, and the tickling crackle of debris sprinkling down on to rock. He heard, as he sprang into movement, quick Gliders, saw the flashes of attack everywhere, and witnessed the first, maybe the last, stand of Tupper's resistance — besieging the heavily guarded, armed, invincible fortress of accumulated military might and he understood, then, that this was nothing they could win. This was a distraction for his benefit. He even thought he could make out a distant whistling, of his old nemesis fighting to give him a chance in an instant, this moment, the time that he had marked for his personal assault. What could they do except support him? He felt sorry for them; they did this out of desperation in his desperate wishes, not for any particular faith in his abilities. And he felt sorry for himself in that too, but he would not waste this chance and he made a sprint across the roof as fast as he ever had, faster, zooming, two or three footfalls, and then pushed off into the air, one knee held aloft, arms above his head, careening through the atmosphere a kite catching its



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streams, whizzing past <sup>thick</sup> cables, high up, up, above all the action, above the sentry guns and soldiers, lasers and bombs, it all happened on a miniature model below, passing as he passed. He had shot up like a rocket, no previous jump to compare with this insane distance, to help him calculate his ~~arc~~ arc, feel out the landing, or even know if he would make it. A spontaneous leap of faith, given over to instincts, if we have instincts, and we must have some — this world would be too overwhelming otherwise, and perhaps that's why it is for some. Oneon gave himself over to this and the sky took him to her bosom and directed him down to the dome which stretched edge to edge over the top of central. So he hit it with a CLANG and proceeded to topple down its side, back down, down, towards the ground and the firefight and the air so charged with vehemence and violence, traitors and heroes, equal in death, he fell, or would fall towards them.

He grabbed and grabbed, awkwardly managing to cease his descent when one of these found their way onto a pipe or thick wire. The dome was laced with such things, like the backside of an eyeball and he held to its retina, panting uncomfortably, letting the pain subside. He should have tried blasting a hole, why had he landed? Well, for a moment it felt good, so



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good, to be above everything and just watch it transpire like any of these stone spectators, now drawn into the first civil war, the first real violence Core City had ever seen within its walls. The Builders had intended all these defenses to be protection from an unknown, outside force, but that worked for internal warfare too — the structures, his structure, was still impenetrable, supposedly — unless one landed on top of it, or so he hoped.

~~The~~ Oneon climbed around until he found a hatch, more of a portal really, probably used to launch aircraft. The problem with this was its size and his size. How could he pry open this large, thick metal door? The more he examined the more he was convinced it would only open from the inside, sliding panels curving out like the opening of lids on an eyeball. All this thinking of eyeballs made him wonder if he was being watched, there must be cameras up here somewhere, but at least he didn't see any guns. He leaned against the door, landy trying to find a way to prize it open until finally, in frustration, he pulled back his fist and gave it a huge punch which set painful shivers through his shoulder and a deep, welling gong into the dome that quieted as it rang outward. He felt as though it gave a little



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bit and prepared to hit ~~it~~ it again, waiting for his shoulder to stop hurting so he could really thwack it. And then it opened and he fell in, righting himself just in time to land upright on ~~the~~ <sup>a</sup> smooth floor.

"Come in," an old but venerable baritone said.

Orean stood up and took in his surroundings although it was confusingly empty despite being so large. The entire room, the size of a playing field, was tiled in dark, <sup>mostly opaque</sup> ~~smooth~~ squares, all of the floor and even onto the ceiling of the dome. In the middle was a single desk, a large, walnut monstrosity with an equally over the top ugly chair. One of those big leather things with the dimples like ~~an~~ an inflatable raft, thick stitching, and a tall back, a deep cherry color. It could spin, roll, and it sat a grayed man in a dignified suit and close-trimmed pepper beard, white hair, black eye brows, and a soft gaze from eyes Orean could not see from here but were obviously trained on him. Besides the tiles there were dozens of those portal doors, such as the one he had come through, and one ~~a~~ set of elevator doors at the far end, on the only flat wall which was just a square jutting out. There was no one else here, nothing else here. The man took off his reading glasses, set down the book and said, "Welcome, Orean. It is my pleasure to make your ~~re~~ acquaintance."



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"Where is William?" Oneon was confused, but he just wanted this over with.

"Why, in his lab, I imagine." He picked up something from his desk and fitted it to the side of his head, on his ear.

"Are you calling him?" Oneon asked, walking forwards towards the strange oasis of wood furniture.

"He knows you're here," the man said simply, almost warmly. He put on a pair of gloves that had been near the ear piece. Then he sat down and made motions of putting on shoes although he was obscured by the desk.

"~~But~~ Where is his lab?"

"Oh, I'll take you there," the voice came from behind the desk. "Just as soon as we've finished."

"Finished?"

"Yes, well, I must be taking Onyx first, of course and then what's left of you." He sighed.

"Poor boy," he seemed to say to himself.

"Whatever, old man, I think we should go there now." Then as he approached the desk and was not more than ten feet away, "Who are you?"

"Ah! How rude of me," the man was standing, smiling, gray eyes but there were something wrong with them — some kind of color in them. unnatural.



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"I am Gravitass." He held out his hand and Oneon was pulled by an unseen force to his grip. "A little strange shaking left hands, but you must get used to that," he said with an absolutely predatory glance and warm, friendly voice. ~~His~~ Their gloved hands touched, the handshake was firm, but not crushing and Oneon stared level, frowning up into his eyes. This strange man was not tall, but neither was Oneon.

"If you think that was enough to scare me, you're wrong." Oneon said to the gentleman and his oily eyes. He saw now that he wore no ear piece, it was a band that fit around his temple and over his ear, like a decorative piece of jewelry or, more probably, some kind of tech.

"Quite," Gravitass smiled at him. He let his hands drop. They faced each other. Standing. One with a simple smile the other a confused frown.

"Well?" Oneon asked.

"Hmm?"

"Aren't you going to stop me?"

"Are you so impatient to die?"

"I could ask you the same."

Gravitass shrugged, said nothing.

Oneon leveled his cannon at the old man's chest, pulling in a surge that rippled brightly through him.



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"Take me to William or bring him here, your choice." Oneon said. He didn't feel like playing games.

"My choice?" Smooth, comforting voice, Gravitas touched his chest in indication. "No chit chat?"

"That's not one of your options, no."

"Pity." He clucked his tongue, shook his head.

"You'd better shoot me, hero."

"Don't tempt me!"

"I won't, but this is your choice — not mine."

Oneon drank in power, felt the tiled walls and dome echo with some weird vibration, and tiny fireflies of light broke from hiding to seek his cannon which spun and shook with eager energy, crackling.

"Marvelous!" Gravitas said with genuine enthusiasm.

Oneon did not want to shoot this idiot, maybe he would just scare him. He grabbed his elbow to steady his right arm and, as Gravitas' smile broadened, he swung it left and blasted the antique chair which had been in a drifting spin, oblivious to the threats and machinations, an innocent inanimate victim, Oneon's example of what would happen to the man if he did not cooperate. Gravitas, for his part, was partially nonplussed, belied by a mild frown, a tilting of the lips in displeasure.

"You sir, have injured my chair."



"Have I made myself clear?"

"No, I'm afraid that cow has been long dead. Would you be destroying all my furniture then?"

"And then you if you don't wise up!"

"I see, first my stuff then me, what a waste."

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"You should be wasting my time," Oron growled, mounting frustration.

"Your time, this thing, has been borrowed from the start — anybody may rightfully waste it except you."

Gravitas gestured with a gloved hand, the other holding his elbow. "There is no sense talking to you at all, most especially if you won't make any sense."

"Fuck, just shut up!" Oron fired another blast, toppling the shelves behind Gravitas, sending them flying and flying apart. He did not respond ~~to~~ <sup>with</sup> words; instead Gravitas brought his hands up in front of him, elbows bent, and pushed at the air, fingers splayed at Oron like stars — he was lifted backwards, upwards, and thrown in a way that felt as if the entire world moved around him, taking him aboard, taking the ground from his feet rather than any strain of being pulled off it. He hardly had time to recognize his disorientation when he crashed once again into the floor region and slid in a struggling heap up against the curved wall.



Gravitas was there, above him, arms out but loose, a casual crucifixion recreation, tok'ing. "You sad, pathetic boy. You have a rare gift that you use to bluff and mistreat furniture." Before Oneo could finish getting up, the world was yanked downward and he was a puppet on invisible strings, thrashing his limbs and grabbing for support that could not be found. "You should have shot me, you might have had a chance."

As though on cue, he tried just that but his target was never where he fired; the world conspired against him, gravity laughed away his blasts that scarred the dome's tiles but left all else intact. Gravitas mocked him with the paradoxically comforting smile of a father playing catch with his son. "Too late.", "Too slow.", etc. and he was suddenly thrown up against the curved walls in a painful smarb that repeated as the dome itself seemed to shake by living volition to rid itself of this foreign threat, a bug in a bottle, and each crash made him think of crunching inside to match those sensations of crunching pain. All it with aching he pulled on all his will, desperately grasping and yanking, but it eluded him as much as a hold on the smooth-tiled surface that slapped him about. Gravitas bore an expression of sincere pity.



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"What are you doing?" He said, faraway and very close. "Nothing, you are doing nothing. You are jailed by your reality, your thoughts and emotions... and pain. You are no one. No one with a gun." More jarring and jolting, but now the world spun around him and he cartwheeled through the air to new locations that bounced him off to others, a toy, a baby's plaything, the mockery of this old man. "All your life you've been nothing. Why would you think this would change you? All it did was give you the power to take away from others, never to get anything back. You kill the few who kept you and what will you have left? It is inevitable that you lose this as you will eventually lose everything through your own destructive means. Better means, same end, I am saving you time."

"You don't know anything, nobody does!" Oneon screamed, tears leaping into the ether only to splatter suicidally on other parts of his body that invaded their space. Some managed to escape and gripped what he could not, sliding about on the tiles, mingling with red that oozed out of his cracked lips and from somewhere within his armor, his sweatshirt.

Oneon couldn't have anything, he could only give and give with no return, no recompense, no reward. He was a failure at everything now mocked and beaten by a



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frail old man pretending to be a savior, a floating saint in this empty church of horror. Flying demon, how was he doing it — what did it matter? Those words he let sail hurt more than this senseless beating, he closed his eyes to it, closed his ears to it, and shut it all down to reset, find a footing that there must be.

Inside a void prevailed, an endless array of handles, will to action, and arbitrary labels that stuck him to concepts as names to people in a dream, totally illogical but yet correct. He felt strings that tied them to him, tied everything to them, and thus tied him to everything, a cog of something vast and important that was just as empty of him, at least in purpose, but encompassed everything, even this dome, even the mocking posthumous gentleman who had gone quiet or he simply could not hear him. Either way it was more pleasant and he took hold of an arbitrary amount of these arbitrary strings and felt energized, alive, and powerful. His mental appendages bount up in this stuff he felt grounded too, no longer drifting, and he opened his eyes to find himself kneeling in a shallow puddle of his blood lightened slightly by his sweat and his tears. Gravitars came down before him, slowly, ~~the~~ silkily, stealth his lies



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compressed in an unhappy fashion, no longer pitying but reprimanding, glass, unnatural irises glinted angrily. "You haven't been paying attention."

"Why should I?" Oneon lifted himself painful, confidently, by the reins of these new handles. His arm was not a cannon but he could not make it out in his periphery and kept his gaze focused on Gravitas. He was solid, rooted.

"Indeed, why would you ever heed any word when you have gotten so far on passion and ignorance."

"Do you always talk so much?" He started to smile, to laugh, but he heard a familiar whistle. No. No! He had to finish this now! Gravitas turned his head and frowned at the elevator floor number that began clicking up.

"You're right for once, I have spent too much time indulging my own curiosities."

"Is that what you call it?"

"In any case, I must finish you off now," the apology appeared on his face and Oneon rushed at him, running in a surging sprint that Gravitas escaped from upwards. Oneon jumped, pressing off the ground, that gave way too late to stop him, and flipped head over heels, firing a blast at Gravitas upside down which was barely dodged but it lit that expression.



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smack dab and a ~~gan~~ dizzying and deadly anti-gravitational dance commenced in a blur. Onean could will himself to a surface, floor, wall, whatever, using those strings of unknown power and connection, but it did not keep Gravitas still, nor did it help him when he was surprised and found himself in the line of his own fire. It exploded off him in a electrifying dish of humming, hissing sparks and he spiraled wildly into what must have been the floor, coughing, spitting, grinding his teeth in a rage and resuming the acrobatic battle within the dome. But he couldn't hit the old man, he was simply never where he should be and the result of all this was the elevator nearly to the top and Onean exhausted, practically blacking out, smeared with blood and sooty rage that darkened his features into a mask of pointless fury. And in one mistep he heard Gravitas yell, "Enough!" And now he dangled again, facing his enemy, whose hands grasped at his armor that melted back into mesh. His own arms were bound by imperceptible force, uncomfortably pulled backwards in a show of exposed supplication as he was brought up to that awful face, that awful kind face with the weird eyes that danced with the spots in Onean's vision.



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completely spent, angry but limp and waiting to die. He smelled the breath of his killer, sickly sweet as bitter tea and felt it hotly upon his face. He stared deeply into those awful eyes, putting all of his hatred in that stare, stuffing it with power and strings and all the mental confetti, metaphysical fireworks that came from all corners of his mind and elsewhere. "Do it then," he said through ~~throat~~<sup>taut</sup> jaw.

Fingers pressing painfully into his arms, his insides now an unfamiliar stew of moving parts and his arm itching painfully, searing, ripping, he screamed but held the stare and poured it all out, all into it. He relaxed into the pain and let it flood him, the a broth for these alien parts, shifting, clicking, crackling, quartered without horses. But he held the stare, he wanted to face this defeat, this failure he would not come back from, and he would have spit in his eyes if his mouth were not busy howling a sob of agony and he let it, he let ~~this~~ be done to him, but then instead he felt he could enter those eyes, mirroring his torture, as a doorway between souls, cables from his own within led there and he grappled along them to grip his enemy from his own frail insides, the emptiness, an array of moldy handles calcified, useless, limited and Granitas.



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strange eyes grew wide as Oron gripped him, as he was in the grip, intertwined, angry, confused. He pulled on both ends, both sides of the connection, the cords, the web that bound them and an icy hot chill ran through him, he fanned the cold flame, stoking his anger and feeding it with the whistle, the desperation of entrapment, and the smugness.

"It's you!" Gravitas exhaled the words, bare of etiquette or pretense, logical veneer gone exposing emotion. There was a ding and the elevator doors opened followed by a familiar (TCHING, a crashing explosion, and Gravitas screaming, "Noo!" Oron saw it all in a blur that was suddenly covered in the flash freeze. A shiny gray, silver, and scarlet blocked his vision as he stumbled into that surreal slow time that made it all specific, but indefinite and infinite. He heard the rattling gun spinning but it was a roar in this time progression and each <sup>from</sup> shell exploded out of the barrel with a cacaphonic boom. He heard these striking the barrier that only barely shifted and mixed with the resounding smashes and sparks of ice his brother was yelling in response; In response to the challenge, the pain, and enclosing a whole conversation in the deafening noise. All this happened in a few seconds, an eternity of firing ice that Gravitas



was frozen through and unable to influence. His mouth agape, generating a track of yelling of his own in a worthless attempt to have Freeman cease fire. Freeman did not until forced to, his face frozen in a furious grimace; none of this Orion could see. It was, however, enough time for it to dawn on him that he was shielded by Bourne, by his arm, but he did not recall it having been there before. He also didn't know if he was grateful, he just knew what he would do next, after this tunnel of violet sounds ended. He pulsed with power, vibrations of it made the floor on which he now sprawled ring with metallic fury, and he glowed with it. Light that could not be denied in the sea of blackness that his consciousness tread water in. It sprang from cracks, seemingly all over his body, and sprayed out. He gripped it as one grips a handful of sand and the strain generated rivulets of sweat and a teetering darkness that threatened to pull him under, shorts in the water. He imagined the his cracked skin revealed only pure light and he was a husk barely holding his essence together.

Kick Boom. The moment that the previous moment was over, Orion commemorated this one by swiping aside Bourne's shield arm and blasting directly at Gravitus who literally exploded into pieces. That same even-



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with such voracity that they seemed to rush in escape, an exodus from a fallen master. The instant before he screamed, began to scream, something to Freeman, but Oneon could not make it out, it may have been "fool" or something pretentious and insulting, but he did not care. He was still holding those strands and he had the sense of yanking Gravitas into the massive blast that erupted long of light and shook tiles from the dome, metal snow flakes that clanged with the metal parts of the Gravitas. There was no blood. He may have been full of sand, Oneon's vision wavered and flicked out, a snuffed candle. Gravitas was unraveled untied and Oneon put out, light to dark, everything was torn apart.

Water. Now he was under water and trapped again, but it was very dark, pitch black, and the water was only liquid. It was oily and thick and suffocating, he could not breathe, and this substance slithered across his skin, he felt it against his face, tickling his eyebrows, and sliding smoothly against his right appendage - what was it? Blood. Death and blood. He was enveloped inside himself or his guts entirely outside and completely immobile. He felt he was standing but he could not tell on what and he heard voices, his own had gone silent, and he stretched to find it, find the words, and climb out of this place of unborn, underneath.



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within the without. It was all so confusing and he was lost in it, marinating in a damaged compass, plasing, dirt, life, he longed to grow out of it, but he was too slow, too sluggish, he was in a different time, he moved in a dance that could take days and only started now in advance, in this much that choked him but would not let him die... or, was he dead already? How do you know how you feel when you cannot see yourself, cannot hear yourself speak, or smell the odors of your body. If touch is enough then it is still easily lost if not transpiring to friction, motionless is without feelings except from within, equilibrium is death. Voices in death, in purgatory, messengers from another world, calling across the chasm, into the flooded chasm of his grave. They were fragmented, the opposite of the wrong visage in a dream with the correct label. They must have been known, because he heard that they knew him. They knew him always and maybe loved him, the true love that is a part and does not cease with sight or memories. He felt bathed in the concept of it, that struck a chord of truth within this stifling swamp, that rang and rumbled through him and was the only movement he had, and it came from him, started by someone else, unbidden, but warm and welcome, sparked and inspired and beautiful even in its constancy - somehow smooth but not flat, straight.



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or boring, for love is curved, it has no corners and cannot box you in; it is piercing not sharp, and you may grab at it without ever catching it — it lives on the periphery where everything is except our focused perceptions, our camera, lens, ego. To be known and know we are known is an inalienable link that cannot be broken, but again — it is a gift never given to those who seek it out directly. It does not draw or push away and Orion was content with it, unsatisfied in his current position, and undesiring of finding its source. He struggled, but not to find anything. Paralysis.

The worst of all traps, the invisible cuffs. He hated this, but there was nothing to do, he couldn't even hire himself out against their tyranny — it would be endless. All there was to do: give up. Be dead, floating, standing, suspended, thick and senseless, or senses filled to choking with the liquid prison — if it was indeed liquid. Curiosity took over in his predicament: if this were sand, fine sand, would it also feel as liquid. He could be in an hourglass, sand rushing by him as time slipped away; perhaps he even was the hour glass. He was an embodiment of passing time; its chalice but not its master, an instrument without control; then who turned him? Who turned away?

The science explained mechanics of organics as machines



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but it remained the logical turning of gears. Its proposal meant that a machine could have consciousness since the turning came from energy and reaction and thus anything alive might be seen as perpetual momentum. A spirit might be a side effect, a soul a clustering of tiny directive actions. Then what was this sleep, this coma? A created being could dream of rationality for the world and itself, in its senses, and an evolved one could envision a divine connection. It does not change reality, it only changes its flavor. Onean could not taste anything, he wondered if it had to do with complete stillness, mentality, or something more sinister.

What did Nicky taste in life? Perhaps she was of the mind that there are no atheists in the trenches and felt the unwinnable war, impossibility reflected to desperate attempts to claim an afterlife that was something, that was NOT nothing. That there is only one life, that we concern ourselves with counting, is a flavor of doom and in Nicky's doom she pledged for an infinite paradise, but if we cannot let go, we cannot go anywhere. Not especially anywhere new. And you cannot force yourself to change in a meaningful way, you must let go and fall into it. Onean regretted leaving her there, he had no excuse for it, and he hoped she was okay — maybe they would meet in her afterlife.



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The one she wanted yet did not believe in. He was sorry. There was nothing to do here except that... or go crazy, and Oneon was starting to feel the opposite. This was an enforced vacation, an ejection from the choices that clouded his conscious life, a freedom to do nothing and have no consequence for he was already in the consequence. Mostly we hope and we fear, but those things that we distance ourselves from may eventually make their claim and we may no longer apply a label from the future to them. We cannot run, Oneon had nowhere to go from here, he had even no sense of direction. Except down, that curious weighting down to his feet was he still wearing those boots? What had even happened? What should he do? He had failed, there was nothing he should do. Even in his triumphs he had been defeated and all that physical power he wielded came to not, toyed with by Gravitas — how many more of Gravitas did William have at his disposal? How could he hope to defeat all of them. Past, hoped, he had been killed or worse. Was he actually feeling his right arm or was it now a ghost limb, a ghostly alien limb? Was it the ghost of a ghost, his original arm? Had he ever possessed one or was he a cripple when Lilee found him, took him in, tried to make him a son and failed...



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He was sorry. Strangely he did not regret killing her, though, because now it seemed a mercy rather than revenge. Was he just trying to justify it? Wasn't life infinitely sacred? Of course, if that were so then crushing a plant, another deathblow, was murder and infinite sin except that it may be waved away by the presence of a soul. In order to avoid paradox, an impossibility regardless, science must defy the presence of such an ethereal thing and in essence sanctify all forms of life-taking since they are unequal only in the functions of organization provided, not in the presence of an attribute that cannot be proved. Why, then, did he feel remorse over it even though he did not feel sorry? It did not change anything. Or did it? After all our actions, if we have free will at all, spring from thoughts and then from intentions. We don't own them, sometimes they surprise us, but it is only in the moment that we live, choosing some and ignoring others. Orion's action would have been the same, given the choice under present circumstances, but his ~~attent~~ intentions would not. Why did he feel so charitable all of a sudden? Why was he forgiving people except that that was the only outlet currently if he did not run with insanity in trying to run, glued in place, submerged in deathly substance



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He sighed to himself, a relieving sigh, a sorry sigh that was not happy, not unhappy, but peaceful. We discount the possibility that anything other than happiness is good and so it had been very difficult for Orion to be happy. He recognized far too much that he was NOT happy, an ideal that he could hardly get his mind around since he put it on a pedestal of hope, and thus decided that he was not happy. Yet the things that brought him joy, or even the ones he thought would bring him joy, could never occur indefinitely, back to back, and this meant the depressing revelation that he would never be "happy" all the time, that impossible ideal he had always generalized into a possibility even though rationally there was no way to obtain it. This is where science falls down, he thought, and something else must take over. All those people in Core City drinking, playing, and stimulating themselves to distract from the cold, hard fact that logic does not lead to an idyllic state of being held his envy for having what he did not and yet again could not make him happy. He sighed again, to himself, related a little more into this coma bed, stream bed, the river of Styx, under a skeletal boat.

Now he was sad. Not for ~~the~~ never, or rarely, being human. — the inability to look back, sum up, and say



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he had been happy. No, he was sad, because he never knew who he had been and it was too late to be curious. He heard others, the fragmented voices, telling him things too but he could not make them out yet they seemed to imply a lot of the knowledge he regretted not having to chew on now: where he came from. Even though, he reflected, that was not who he is or was or whatever. It is mankind's desire for order that causes us to stack our experiences, memories, achievements, etc. into a precarious tower and call it a person, someone, who they are, and what they will be because it is another addition, a level, and it's no wonder that we fall, crashing down, and must rebuild, rise, or give up and settle for a pile, a mess, be misunderstood, and inexplicable to the other towers, the heads of stone giants buried up to their necks. Owen did want the knowledge, though, he didn't care what it meant and it felt like all ties, all bets, all pretense was now broken and he would wait here in this circumstance outside of time until the opportunity presented itself — or someone saved him.

Gah, except Bourne — he didn't want any more of his meddling protection. Maybe if he had been allowed to freely follow his own chaotic route, he could have achieved more, reached his goal, won. It would



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be better if he never heard that damn whistle again, never saw that ~~face~~ <sup>know-it-all</sup> face, the faux father, the masculine center of their fucked up family, the idealized son who turned all of Oneo's achievements to crap. He was probably kissing Nicky again, shamelessly, guiltlessly, or doing more and the jolt of jealousy consumed his frozen body, heating it, boiling it, but that main wave of it passed and left a frustrated sadness in its wake. Why shouldn't his brother get the glory? Didn't he rescue the failed hero, the wreck of a boy who had gone through hell yet could not ... finish, could not get to where he needed? After all that and his stupid protector, playing guardian angel, still has to save him. How long had he been followed? ~~At~~ All that work and Bourne snatching it away from his baby brother; not even his brother! He was just a key to this new war, he wasn't even a person to him or any of them, Tupper had made that clear. Oneo was a volatile, pivotal prize to be coveted but never to run free. No wonder Bourne had been so vigilant, because he was, and had been, Bourne's prize, a secret, potential wealth and a power that was his to keep, but Oneo would not go that easy, would not go without a fight. Unfortunately that fight had laid him flat led him to this predicament. He



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would not be so ignorant or forgiving next time. If Bourne stood in his way, if he even showed his face — he would kill him.

As this feeling arose, he felt propelled upwards, slowly, yet feet still planted. He imagined looking that way, up, rising from the deep towards a shimmery surface that was bright, blue, warm, and sunny even though all he saw was blackness. In the mind's eye there are infinite colors that are not created by light, regardless of the spastic retinal patterns dancing on the undersides of our eyelids; we can transcend what we see — or deny it, they are not the same thing. And so he saw things that he put there, rocketed by irritation threatening to escalate into rage, and drawn to a surface of better things that he hoped would include consciousness, another chance, freedom.

Eyes fluttered, bringing in dim strobing light, shadows appearing and disappearing, existence recreated in repetition. Feeling fluttered, the sensation of losing ground as he found himself to be on his back, nothing even touching his feet, lying on some surface, arms at his side, sound still dim, dimmer than the light, and a stale taste in his mouth. His jaw hurt, he felt tender, bruised, tired. and he supposed <sup>even</sup> ~~even~~ that might be considered



abnormally light considering what he had been through. He felt also stiff, leaden, and damp, cold but not shivery. His hair sprawled crazily and lazily behind his head and his eyelids were hardly cooperative. It took some time and a great effort before he could hold them open and blinking didn't bring them down again. Mahogany. ~~off~~ The ceiling was wood. Wood! His arms lay by his sides and he pushed himself up onto his elbows. He had no shirt on.

There was a pink ridge with peaking redness underneath in a vertical range across his chest. His left arm was purple, blue, orange ... a brilliant sunset set of bruising. His skin, though, was not sooty or black but smooth, a strange viscosity such as a wet fish, oily, clammy, and it seemed he had been marinating in liquid. He then looked at his right arm and could not tell where the sparkly granite metal ended and his flesh began, they ran into each other like two rivers, precision work, but why wouldn't it be for something so damn important to everyone — even him. This Oyx thing that wasn't enough. He looked around.

Cherry wood, oak, solid furniture. Flower paintings. And... a whole lot of stage equipment including a canister-shaped tank full of liquid that must've been where he had been soaked. Machines. Flashing lights



computers, screens, wires, hoses, needles, drugs on trays, metal instruments, bloody rags... his sweatshirt blackened, reddened, torn to shreds — it had been blue at some point. He was taken aback to find himself in his skivvies when he saw his jeans next to the sweatshirt — not in a much better condition. These weren't even his briefs... something tighter, stretchier... he was mortified to think someone had undressed him, it seemed unnecessary, embarrassing to him, and just rude! He tried to swing off the table, a solid thing of thick wood and simple, etched designs, but dizziness set him back and he lied down, breathing steadily, consciously performing each inhalation and exhalation, focusing on a spot on the ceiling as waves of shadow tried to pull him under. When the spell had passed, he sighed, and listened.

Quiet but not silent. No creaking, not inside, just the soft chirping of birds and the humming of computerized instruments. Morning. No lamps were on, only daylight which fought through fog to invade the room, fought through ghosts, Lilee at peace, a ghost? Maybe she made a better poltergeist than a mother. What had she been like as a wife?

"Ah, the killer awakers." Oren jumped to the soft, steady voice of Ron behind him in the doorway.



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"I'm no killer!" He protested, guiltily, shuffling his thoughts away from his late mother.

"She might beg to differ," Ron said making a nod with his head, tilting it to point to another room. He had his arms folded, leaning against the frame, and above or below Oreon's flush he thought the pose was the ~~same~~ Sam used yet Ron's way of it was different. His voice was level, he did not seem angry, and when Oreon did not answer, ~~Ron~~<sup>he</sup> said quietly, or in that same tone, "I don't know what you are." He rolled his head to one side slightly, it might have been a shrug. Oreon was sitting up again, he slid off the table and ended up in a heap, rubber legs that would not support him, in his underwear, his face was on fire and if that cater of hell had not burned it, well it was certainly red now. His mind swam with the spots of his vision and he groped stupidly for something to hold, to pull himself up, but he may as well have been a fish for all the ineffective flopping. He was suddenly lifted to his feet by two strong arms holding him underneath his shoulders. He shook free and put his palms on the table, sweating, thoughts swirling dust, emotions twisted in a hurricane. It is easy to be a certain way if the circumstance pushes you towards it, but he was no longer consciously unconscious.



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He was fully awake in the cruel distortion of reality, his senses, his hormones, everything conspiring to confuse him, attempting to quarter him. He scrunched his face up, a ball of tightening at the center of his skull, what was this now?

"I'm sorry," Ron said suddenly, putting a hand on his shoulder — Orion burst into tears. More than that, it was a storm of sobbing, of racking and wheezing, the kind that is pathetic the kind that we shudder from at the sight of it, but Ron did not remove his hand; it was neither slack nor gripping and Orion knew he was not apologizing for his previous comment, it was empathy and commiseration and disarmingly selfless, open, and earthy. Orion was suddenly a child, a baby, and he turned into Ron's chest and buried his face in the dark, purple striped suit. It must have been expensive, but Ron just held him and patted his back as the sobs poured out recklessly from the limitless well, that place that remembers everything. Tear drops as rain drops, falling, falling from the fallen boy, the failed hero, naked, helpless, weak...and scared. He let himself experience being overwhelmed, he let the wave push him to the rip tide and sweep him out to the sea of lost ~~and~~... under it, falling in water, is it swimming when you're drowning? He couldn't breathe, he didn't want to.



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Ron must have understood. He said nothing and his pats were a periodic beat to let him know he was there but not so frequent that he was embarrassed or too intimate to pretend he was anything more than an acquaintance, a concerned citizen, a monk, an angel? He merely waited without slouching or shifting and finally his staunch pose won out over Oneon's emotions, his amazement and curiosity at his soft stone guardian. He pulled back, wiping his eyes, and a handkerchief was suddenly proffered which he accepted gracelessly, the gracelessness of one who feels pitiful and does not care. Of course he cared, he ~~just~~<sup>just</sup> could not let go of his rebelliousness, stubborn idea that him being ~~apitiful~~ made this a gesture of pity — and he hated being pitied.

"Hassan would like to see you?"

"The crime boss, I mean, your boss?"

Ron smiled. "Something like that."

"What if I refuse?"

"I will be forced to take you anyway."

"I don't want to go."

"That doesn't mean you won't."

Oneon paused. "I — I'm scared of him."

The smile stayed, neither mocking nor supportive.

"Be brave, Oneon, it's easy when you know how."

Hassan I believe wants to help you."



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"How?" Ron started to say something about Hessen and he cut him off, "No, how can I be brave?"

"Everything is transient, it does not rely on what happened outside, before now." Ron looked at him steadily.

"I don't understand."

"Show up and let go, that's all there is to it."

"Let go of what?"

"What makes a coward?"

"Running away."

Ron laughed. "Not exactly, it is ~~let~~<sup>the</sup> grip of worries, preconceptions, and that funny thing we call fear. He listens to them and they are very convincing and if they tell him to ~~run~~, he runs."

"That doesn't sound easy."

Ron held out his hand, Oren returned the handkerchief, dubiously considering all the goop he left on it, but Ron stuffed it unself consciously into his breast pocket.

"How about this Ren. First, show up. Then," and he put a friendly hand back on his shoulder, his right shoulder. "Say to yourself, 'fuck it.'"

"What if I fail - er - again."

"Then you fail. If you intend to fail, though, then you have already failed. Intend only one thing at a time and you will be fine."

"That still sounds hard."



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"It only sounds that way." Ron waited a moment.

"Come on, let's go." He handed Oneon a fresh set of clothes, jeans, sweatshirt, practically the same thing, he scrambled into them, eager to be covered. Ron was intimidating to him, not in a violent way, but still enough so that he did not want to be exposed in front of him.

"Did you bring me here?"

"No, and everyone else is gone. I assumed you would be here and it's better I find you instead of Williams' goons."

Oneon nodded, he didn't want to know more, to know who brought him, because he had an assumption he did not want confirmed. "Where is Sam?"

"I don't know."

"Can you guess?" Oneon was realizing that Ron had committed himself to a sort of truthfulness that made many of his answers rather vague, and irritating. The lean asian smiled lazily.

"Of course," he said, and because it was obvious what Oneon would ask next: "Besieging Central still, I would guess, digging in. Not everyone can fly to the roof, of course, but mostly this is to buy time and keep William busy until they can find you. I am a little surprised she didn't get here first — but only a little."



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"You mean she didn't have me brought here?" Oops, he didn't want to know and now he was getting a picture.

"Someone's scarlet ~~head~~ steel," Ron nodded to Oreon's facial reactions. "Who he notified?" Ron spread his hands. "I can only tell you that I guessed you would be here—in what condition or by what connections, that is a mystery I do not have the answers to."

"Let's go," Oreon said curtly, leaving the room, touching the walls to steady himself. Ron followed wordlessly. "I think they drugged me, I feel... unsteady." ~~He~~ Oreon admitted, his head a churning pend.

"They?"

"You know who I mean."

"Why would 'they' drug you?"

"To keep me safely unconscious."

"Ah, you're a bit of a firebrand."

They left the foot of the stairs and exited through the beautiful double doors of the safe house. Oreon looked around, a heavy fog nested on the woods and thick dew wetted everything in sight, which admittedly wasn't much. He did not see any bikes. He looked at Ron then down at his feet, he saw Ron wearing the boots. "Where is my armor and stuff?"

"Your? Are you planning to be fighting?"



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"You don't know, do you?"

Ron laughed, pleasantly and softly. "No, I do not."

Oreon sighed. "I'd rather not be shot at wearing just this." He plucked at the sweatshirt. "Are you going to tell me not to get shot at?"

"It would certainly help," Ron's eyes twinkled.

"Come on, this way." He stepped off the porch and into the mist of the courtyard, an arbitrary direction that Oreon surmised was anything but. He had so many questions and he finally felt encouraged to ask, if he could only find the right ones.

"Who am I, Ron, and what is this thing?"

"You are Oreon and that is Oryx." He held up his hand to cut off the protest of such a plain response.

"It doesn't matter who you think you were or what other people think for that matter. You know enough, don't you? What else do you need to know?" He opened a door in the courtyard wall and ushered Oreon through, entering something briefly into a concealed keypad.

"I just need to know, I feel like it would help me understand myself better."

"What don't you understand?"

"I'm so confused about everything and every one— who I hate and who I love... what I have done... who I



am doing things, why I am doing anything!"

"That is natural."

"Sure and I'll just grow out of it and everything will make sense?"

"No, not with age anyway. That kind of peace must be gently sought, faced, and cultivated."

"What do you mean?" They were walking now in the clouds, crunching dewy frosted leaves on the forest floor, and hearing the periodic chirps of birds.

"Well, if you will indulge me, I will tell you about myself, my life, the person whom I know best." He looked across to Orion who nodded, feeling an unexpected pleasure at the prospect of learning this man's life who was so secretive, openly so.

"When I was your age, as these stories go, I was a sad lover who had no appreciable, marketable skills, no girl, no prospects, and a practically non-existent family. Oh my father was there, but I was invisible to him. He fed and watered me, a gardener tending to a potted plant, but beyond that he was completely uninterested, I was a duty and nothing more. I don't know where my mother was and I never asked, he never said.

"I was embarrassed about myself and only took easy loads for fear — well, for fear itself, since I was already in a bad situation by denying myself failure. I thought



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constantly about my defects, "ugly, stupid, small dick." Oneo. choked on a bark of a laugh. "I ran and reran through that list, beating myself down, and listening to what it said in every situation — even just the possibility of a situation. What could I do? What girl would want me? And yet I gave into those simple desires, so I ate, I dreamt of success, and I played video games. In short, I thought I wanted to be better but I didn't point myself in that direction, I acknowledged it as a place too far for me to go. After graduating high school I was recruited as a Kop, which was again easy since my dad was one.

"I treated that job no better than school. It was a paycheck that I used to fill my apartment, my stomach, my soul with garbage, cheap junk. It's so easy to medicate by buying distractions and pretend you're happy, but I was not, I was deeply unhappy and underneath the veneer was the list and roiling emotion, confusion, warfare in my head. I was a mediocre kop at best until I met Sam and she loved me, yelled me into some semblance of a decent officer and we became friends after partners. I

"I fell in love with her, of course, or rather I thought it was love but it was infatuation. It's



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a simple thing to confuse the two when you find someone amazing. Anyway, I worked harder and harder, for her benefit, to get her attention and respect, but you know she did not appear to notice and although I received many accolades, I only got pats on the back and such from her. We made a good team, but it was not great, because it was imbalanced. I loved her more than the reverse and thus our actions were influenced differently: duty, emotion, etc.

"She fell for someone else, it happened so suddenly, and then I felt desperately alone again. All the lights went out. It's amazing how someone else's life changes will effect our own. None of my circumstances were different — we had never been lovers but even if we had, we weren't then. My mind tortured me, intertwined the list of defects with this variable, proof of my failures, and played out dark visions of their time together.

"They weren't perfect, no one is, but she confided in me the problems and I pretended this <sup>made</sup> ~~was~~ me special, better than him, when really we were taking advantage of each other. Well, to skip a bit, things happened between us, highs and lows, but she ended up with him and I left the force — crushed. I didn't want to live anymore. It was as if I had



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lost the only good opportunity of my life."

They walked in some silence under the whispering tree tops, unseen voyeurs hidden in water-diffused light. Ron appeared to be contemplating the nostalgia borne of his words, tasting it for raw flavor, curiously. Oren wanted to ask, but dared not break this meditation of memories. So they just walked that way, in the damp and crisp intermingling airs, the smell of an ending in progress, after death, before rebirth, fall.

"Why do you want to kill her?" Oren asked, unable to help himself. "Is it revenge for choosing that other guy?"

"Hmm?" Ron stepped out of his trance with a side-ward glance and then absorbed the question. "No, it is not revenge, it is a promise. It's difficult to explain but we risked our lives daily, especially once we began the task of hunting down and disabling Hossan's underground empire. We made a pact that we would not die by the enemy, but to each other. It was young, naive, and I thought quite romantic but as you probably know, as far as Sam it was an extension of her fiery stubborn nature; she did not want to give our enemies the pleasure of killing her."

"And it will be your pleasure?"

"So quick with the riposte young sir? Let me not



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back to where I was and then maybe it will make more sense — although I can't guarantee that.

I quit, not just my job, but my life. I didn't even get rid of it, I cut it off. I <sup>simply</sup> walked out of the city and into the woods, taking nothing with me I didn't already have."

"You let everything go?"

"Quite the opposite, yet you wouldn't know it to look at me. I had everything brewing in a storm up here." He turned his head. "I didn't know what to do about it, it was overwhelming. I went out into this forest all those years ago because I did not know what else to do, I ran away, but the mind and memories follow, attached as a shadow that grows in the slanting light. None of that material stuff matters and it is never more apparent than when you have everything or nothing and your mental troubles are still the same."

"What did you do in the forest?"

"I sat, tried to think of peace and life as an abstract, but it didn't work. I was giving my thoughts power by running from them. And when darkness crept into the day, I panicked as any civilized person might, about the prospect of sleeping out here, finding food, and honestly where to shit and how to wipe my ass. Yet I stayed and the panic passed. It ran its course. When it ran it



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could not alter mine." I was one of those who

"You make it sound external."

"Oh, it is, but we attribute all these things to ourselves and thus say we are cowards. We are only cowards to listen and obey. You know, thoughts come and go, we do not know from where or to where, but we think they are us. They are not, they are only thoughts passing through our heads as we pass through this world. I apologize that this sounds a bit metaphysical, I suppose these are strong views."

"Heretical," Orion nodded humbly, the onslaught of philosophy pouring so openly from this strong, gentle creature that no one would cross in one's way. It must take a lot of courage to speak so spiritually, so casually. He found his own mind trying to resist, throwing logical barriers into place and questioning a society based on this rather than facts.

"Yes, isn't it sad that science has bred so much prejudice against things that it itself cannot validate?"

"How else are we supposed to know what's true?"

"You know. Maybe not all the facts and details, but if you brush aside the voices that you know I did not know that then but as I survived the days I began to realize how limiting my knowledge had been, my rationality."



"I took irrational risks that statistically should have killed me, but I survived, an outlier. We disregard outliers as 'noise', <sup>an</sup> but irony for something so sure of itself as science. I don't mean to sound bitter, it isn't all bad just as you aren't all good. It only does not matter as much as we are told it does.

"I took long walks, sat through long days, and without the distorted lens of modern living, things slowly came clearer to me. I began meditating, earnestly at first, and then out of habit, watching in wonder as those sticky thoughts dried to grains of sand and slid from my mental grasp. I was no longer thinking about my defects, my place in the world, I was being, but it was lazy to in regards to history, purpose, destiny or what have you, and I was not, or not, ready to denounce living and the fates conspired to help me.

"Hassan found me, or rather some goons. I doubt he had such a personal vendetta against me but Sam and I had caused much trouble for his organization and I'd ~~pe~~ killed his men on occasion. These must have remembered me and one of those occasions. There were three, four maybe, and they surrounded me, jeered, threatened, and told me I would not be spared a quick death. I was scared, but I was trapped, and at that moment I decided I would have to kill them, all but one - to go back to



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Hassan as my witness. I did not tell them this, they would not have believed me anyway. Once I made my pure intention to myself, some part of me took over which planned out the methods, and then another which executed. They were tough, but their mistake was that they did not wholly intend to kill me, for then it was only a likely possibility, not something they fully intended. I saw only one choice, one outcome, I chose it and ignored all else, and despite their weaponry and numbers — I did exactly what I set out to and one ran off as well."

"And then you went to work for Hassan?"

"Just so."

"Even though he had been your enemy? Why didn't he kill you?"

"He was a figurehead in my mind only and I wanted to know the man. I went to him for that, he offered me employment, the position of one of his men that I felled, and I took it."

"I don't understand. I don't know how this is supposed to help me."

"Understanding others can help us unlock our own secrets, forge a rough key so to speak, because what we hate or relate is a reflection of our perception."

"Did you read all this in a book?"



"Some," Ron admitted. "While working for Hassan I perused his library often enough. What I found, though, were either things I disagreed with or those that gave words, articulation, to amorphous feelings within."

"I guess I should read more."

"It is a better hobby than beating yourself up," Ron said mildly.

"I didn't do this to myself... well, you know when I was hurt since I seem to be better now."

"I wasn't talking about your recent tussles although I think you'll agree you had a fair bit to do with them as well."

"What should I have done?"

"You know that, if anything. And it doesn't matter now — what are you going to do now matters now."

"I guess I'm going with you to Hassan, walking there for whatever reason."

"Because you're in no condition to run and a piggy-back ride would demean both of us."

Oneon laughed. "I am a bit wobbly, Ron?"

"Yes?"

"I know you say it doesn't matter but what do you think this Onyx is? I mean, it's like part of me, I can feel it within as something I can grab to make it do stuff, but sometimes I think it's the one controlling me."



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Ron sighed, "You are going to struggle with this, whatever it is, but it no more controls you than I do — it just has more tempting things to offer."

"Like power?"

"Yes, and that must be very tempting. I'm not sure what I would have done if I had it instead of you, all those years ago."

"What would you do with it now?"

"Find out about it, make peace with it."

"You wouldn't use it?"

"Oh, I suppose I would, but I'm not a big fan of guns and I've never seemed to need them," Ron shrugged, and Oren noticed the Si at his sides and a sword across his back.

"Swords? Isn't cutting, well, more gross?"

"It's a challenge; skill and intimacy."

"Intimacy?"

"There's no gap, no abstractions — when you kill, you know you are killing. Or wounding, if you're sending a message. Anyway all this is possible with guns but less likely."

"Aren't you afraid, you're underarmed and you'll get hurt?"

Ron started to shake his head then thought about it a bit. "I'd be afraid even if I had a gun."



the fear never goes away — it only loses its power of command. "And I will use a firearm on occasion."

"Special occasions?"

"Yes," chuckled Ron. "I'm not above pragmatism."

He started to say something but Ron hushed him. "Get ready," the lean man said.

"Ronin!" A voice boomed invisibly from the mists, heavy and tangible and all around. "I see you have my prize; will you give it willingly?"

"I am no one's prize!" Oneon said hotly and pondered then at the extra meaning he read in his own words while Ron waved his hand low in an indication to be silent as he also answered.

"Woodrow, your ambush leaves something to be desired."

"Ha ha! I do not need your tricks to beat you."

"And yet you have never beaten me."

"I have not tried so hard before, no reason. Those were practice, you may think of them." The accent was hard to place, it was leaden, weighted down by the brassy booming but the English only slightly imperfect.

"Fine, then hurry up, we don't want to keep Hassan waiting." Ron nodded at Oneon as he slowed to a stop, still standing erect, arms loosely by his sides. Oneon pulled and twisted his arm into a cannon but it felt different, not weaker just... tender somehow.



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"Oh ho, so cocky! I will sell to Hassan - if he is the highest bidder."

"Out with you, hermit," Ron said sternly.

The birds had stopped and when there was no response it became very quiet, muffled under the gray wool packing material, cotton in the trees' ears. Cold, wet, frozen, Orion shivered and darted looks around but they were surrounded by this gray pea soup and visibility extended a few meters only. Ron sniffed the air slowly, deliberately and cocked his head to one side then the other, his knees bent a little and his hands came up to rest on the handles of the Si tucked into his belt, an odd contrast to the posh suit he still wore which, miraculously, had not a spot or a tear to be seen. Leaves gave their last and fell to rest with hissing sighs, scraping the blanket of their forerunners. A further sliding sung hushed as Ron drew out his legs slightly, but Orion did not know where the attack would come from or what it would involve. He felt naked, vulnerable, the entire world was clothed and he was under-dressed. How could Ron be so sure, where did he think the attack would come from and why wasn't he looking around to try to parse the forest, the trees, and this mysterious Woodrow. It was so still, so



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quiet. Couldn't he just start this already? Why wasn't Ron saying anything, should HE say something? He tried to think back to what he had said. It was so recent yet seemed so abstract. Oneon had no concrete example to relate it, he felt its substance slipping through his mental fingers even while he wanted to know so badly, to have that kind of calm confidence, aura, and courage. Did Ron know how he envied him? Look how perfectly he handled everything and what fates brought him. True, he did not have the love of his life but he had accepted that — sort of, except for the whole killing bit when Sam is ready that Oneon could still not get his head around. Where was this damn guy and why wasn't he showing himself. Oneon had all this time that was essentially worthless because it could be cut off, cut short at any time. Maybe there was a meaning in that, a lesson — what didn't he start because he thought only of an ending, a result? Not just out of fear but preventative thinking. Why does one decide NOT to start rather than just not thinking about not starting? He really wished this would start, whatever it was, and he realized he was scared — not just of Hassan — but all mysteries. Before he fought Gravitas, he had an idea of overcoming challenges that made



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sense and was linear, in a way, one route, easy. He could apply "just show up" because he knew what he expected or rather how he expected to win - pump enough effort into it and he could get through anyone... and then he couldn't. Now he wondered if Woodrow possessed something similarly unknown that he could not beat and he was afraid of it, afraid of losing, and afraid of dying. He, Oneon, was afraid to die, he didn't want to - yet what had changed, what did he really have to live for? Did he... need something to live for?

Suddenly he heard brush rustling, the undergrowth in this forest was very thick just beyond the trail or whatever it was they followed. He heard sniffing and growling and padded feet running, a loping, hungry, devilish run with only one intention, he knew, and it echoed in sides all around them, attacking. Phantomly first as stars are their dying light and Oneon fought back, startled out of his brief trance, firing thundering blasts towards the sounds, at these ghost hunters, cool fiery blasts that poked holes like smoke rings in the fog and gave them brief tunnels of vision, then clattering of sticks and sticker bushes and tree trunks being slaughtered. There was a yawning crash as one tree felled, wiping



desperately at the ether as if it was a substantial substance to repel its decline. And a yelp, maybe two, plus laughter that underscored the threatening growls coming nearer, adding italics to their bearing, making them more or less real, drawing them to corporeal form from shaded vibrations beating at his curtain to their ears — Ron did not move, but some strands of his hair did in response to Oneon's eager bullets, missiles into space, and a lock of it obscured part of his face yet he left that too and his eyes were low, dull almost, breathing subdued, mouth slack and slightly open. Oneon, for his part had ceased firing into the blank but spun anxiously about to try and get a bearing a tree noses, pin them to a direction and an arrival point.

Then: orange, yellow, and tinges of blue in a hoarse roar that sucked in upon the fog and swallowed it into an invisible maw of fire, a fireball. Oneon threw himself to the ground as it zoomed over him, scorching the air and the hair on his skin, and exploding violently against a tree. Ron still had not moved and the maniacal laughter continued and large dogs with petrol tanks and launchers like roman candles burst into view, in the vacuums created by their firepower. Ron sprung into action as suddenly and silently as a depth charge seeming to expand



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and contract in fluid movements, first pulling the blade off his back and following by fending off the converging fireballs preceding their canine sources. Oneon rolled to his feet and threw his own shattering blasts at the incoming projectiles, shimmering, reverberating, they popped or deflected in hissing WUMPS! Oily flames spiraled from the exploding stars, raining heat into the frozen ground, more steam rose from the beds of dead leaves under their feet.

"Ha ha! Burn it down! Ha ha, ooh you dare so good!" The brassy voice thundered, closer or louder, and it struck a chord of panic in Oneon. They could handle this, but it was so strange and awful and he did not want to harm the bearers of the flame; Ron had no such qualms. Seamlessly bridging the time from the last fireball to the first huge dog was the stitch of his sword which careened through the air faster than Oneon could watch, and he couldn't much because he had his own to deal with. He fired at one then another and the smell of gruesome hair burning, sizzling with the flesh it had covered and mingling with the wet scent of new hot blood running cold into a Fall bath among the forest floor. Ron's sword flickered in, out, away through and these massive muto



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dropped horribly silent, gurgling to their ends and sighing off in a topple. Oneo's victims yelped, they screamed, they were burned by cold fire, his ice to their earthbound suns, and he hated it, it unnerved him. He felt he dealt pain more than death, the gentle kind Ron answered, and then his cannon jammed or stopped, yes it just stopped and one of these beasts flung ~~the~~ towards him, smashing him to the ground, fully the same size or even larger, the weight beyond that did not matter because he could not get out and a crazed snout smiling in a crazed rage opened to him, full of evil promises spoken with tearing growls as the huge jaw worked with lips pulled back into that grim reaper grin. Oneo's hackles rose to match and he tried pushing it away but he felt the strength in his arms, not fully returned, giving in and the face, neither desperate nor triumphant, only primal, this primal face of animalistic desire filled his world and his senses. Then it stopped and slumped forwards in a final growl that turned into a wheeze and he rolled out before it crashed to the bosom, the lake bottom of cold earth. ~~Then~~ He rolled out to see Ron stepping smoothly backwards, the shiny metal leaking out of the



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creature as a stick pops out of water. He nodded a check at Oneon, but he had his brows furrowed slightly in concern. Oneon returned the nod, sweating, breathing, standing a little unsteadily and he admitted to concern to. Was his health connected to this thing?

Ron stiffened and pulled something out of his back to the tune of the voice crying "Leave! Yes, be leaved - ha ha!" Oneon could see the blood on the little shuriken-like projectile Ron looked at in his hand and he went cold as he dropped his sword. Oh no! He didn't want to lose this man... friend? Were they friends, could they be? Ron swayed and nearly fell but caught himself and shook his head as if to clear this away - poison? He dropped, arms swinging down, dropping the metal leaf, and a triumphant laugh, rising in pitch, was followed by a zipping sound like wasps or - leaves and brush being snipped by new projectiles. Oneon could only watch in horror.

But Ron's arms snapped to attention, snagging the smaller swords from his belt, and he alertly pointed towards the noise, crouching, swords out from his sides, wide. And then the racket coalesced into a waspy storm of the blades that he bit



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from the air with surgical precision and a wave-like dance of movements, cresting on their down fall, sparks bleeding out as little fireworks as the leaves fell in thunks to the ground or embedded themselves in nearby trunks. Then Ron too dropped, to a kneeling position, and Oneon got up, running over to catch him just as the Si slid from his fingers and ~~he~~ <sup>the</sup> lanky form went limp and sprawling. His eyes were somewhat unfocused but his voice was clear. "Up to you now" and then stopped and he fell out of the boy's grasp to topple unceremoniously, terribly, and floppy to the ground, on the organic and metal leaves waiting to catch him. Oneon felt terribly shaken, his heart beat in erratic thumps, gulped down a terrifying anxiety, his hands shook as he rose from Ron's ~~wrists~~ <sup>form</sup>. His hands, both of them, one flesh and weak, the other morphable metal and unresponsive. This great man had fallen because of him, fallen so easily, and now he would be next. The voice cackled like a bonfire, a raging forest fire.

"The mighty Ronin has lost, the prize is mine. Oh, little boy, where are the powers they promised you would have? Ha ha, did you LEAVE them at home?"

"Come find out for yourself coward!" Oneon



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yelled into the slashed trees, the bloodied mist, the scorched world. His voice cracked as the flame bit it, a burning fear or just physical immaturity, it broke against the wall of laughter, swallowed in more, a stream by a flooding river.

"Oh ho ho ha! I shall, oh I shall, little boy."

This was not the time for mere indignation but Oneon's face flushed all the same; he resented being called a little boy. Yet by leaning on Ron and stroking his recent feebleness, he felt as helpless as any child. A stubbornness flickered within, breaking free from fear and rage. "Then face me! This isn't hide and seek!" He added this with a touch of heat that brought sweat to his chest and he took in a meal of air through his nose slowly and out slowly, leaving behind the desperate search within for the handle he could now not sense, or find; if it had finally gone then so be it — he wasn't all that one power, he wasn't defenseless, and it was up to him now, to not let this crazed being have a finally glory over Ron or to bag him like sump fish from a stream. Let us just see what he can do and what I can too, Oneon thought. Ron's words, so recently said and forgotten now floated through his mind: show up, let go. Okay, let's



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try this — there is nothing to lose in the venture. Whatever pride is lost by my loss is secondary to the matter of life and death. Or just life.

There was a graceless crashing and the forest objects bent, broke, and whipped about as a portly figure of impressive girth bounded gaily out of it, the woods birthed Woodrow, <sup>sporting</sup> a goofy grin, square and flat as his face, but turned up sharply at the edges. He wore a massive plate across his chest, a grid of slits and the appearance of polished woodgrain or petrified wood. A rough helmet sat on his broad head like a stump and wires ran down his raggedly clothed arms to end in diodes and buttons at his fingertips. More wood plates were tied to his limbs, ~~but~~ and he wore sandals.

"Tada!" He exclaimed, even more booring, at point blank range and looked at Orion with a vicious pair of large eyes sunken into a smile-wrinkled brow. He was not tall but his width made him appear gigantic. He spread his arms as if he would sweep Orion up into a bear hug. "Now what, little boy? Would you like to give me that arm yourself? I can lend you something to cut it off!" He reached behind his back, surprisingly limber for a fat man, and produced a long, ugly-toothed saw. He made cutting motions with a grin and laughter.



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Why hadn't he run? Then again, where would he go and who would he see — he would be alone again. He stood up straight, at his full height, nearly that of this fat forest freak, and stepped in front of Ron's body, only a few feet separating him and Woodrow. Woodrow laughed at him, laughed in his face, shaking and rattling with mirth, but Oneon did not react, he merely stared, waiting, still unsure what to do or what would happen next.

Woodrow suddenly reached out and snatched Oneon's right arm, a longer reach than his fatness belied, and yanked Oneon to him. And Oneon slapped him. In his flight to close that gap he swung out his left and caught Woodrow's flabby, flat face with his palm and fingers. Oneon's hand stung, Woodrow's smile disappeared and an irritated red flush bloomed across his darkened features. "Brat!" He screamed. What had he expected him to do, go quietly? No, well, he certainly did not expect a slap, maybe a punch would be more usual. A slap is quite insulting, especially to a fighting man used to more manly attacks. But Oneon was a boy and he didn't care what Woodrow thought, nor did he even think to slap, it came unbidden. And before Woodrow had finished that short word, Oneon jabbed ~~and~~<sup>his</sup> finger into one of Woodrow's



eyes, so that the scream ended with a childish scream in a massive baritone that shook the ground. He let go of Oneon who, tipped off balance, fell back onto his butt, the saw fell next to him, with a warping clatter. Woodrow squeezed his potted eye shut under a glaring, enraged brow. "I'll teach you!" But Oneon wasn't afraid, it was too odd, he was in the thick of it, in the situation that fear had walled off as concealing as fog. He stared at the violent tantrum turning from threat to action and it played out slowly, the deep voice losing all articulation and melding in a low vibration to the rest of the woods, the world, the backdrop and it was almost comforting. Oneon smiled even ~~as~~ as he saw the hands close on those triggers upon <sup>Woodrow's</sup> ~~his~~ hands and heard grinding clicks of metal being set in place. The bloodied clearing of this battle-ground brightened then, in an exponential arc of increasing exposure, fog thinning enough to let in blue sky and piercing Autumn sun. Oneon closed his eyes ~~to~~ it, letting it wash his face, so as not to get any in his eyes, like saltwater or chlorine, for the sun's touch is both comforting and cruel. He heard twangs and pops as dozens of projectiles left their homes in Woodrow's torso plate to fly off towards oblivion. He imagined tiny pilots, immigrants, orphans and he welcomed them to his world.



But it was not to be, and truly, he knew that somehow. So when he opened his eyes, he was not shocked to see Woodrow gaping at him stupidly in a silence more deafening than his voice. Oneon had his right arm in front of his face, forearm facing out, fist clenched although it was just a fist. His left propped him up and he felt the end of a sweet breeze that arranged his hair mostly away from his face. He did not stand up. Woodrow fell forward, belly flopping onto his face and behind him crouched Ron who immediately stood up, and wiped off his sword, and sheathed it on his back. "Well done," he said.

"You, the dart!" Oneon stammered. Ron smiled indulgently and perhaps chuckled a little in his chest.

"It was only one and Woodrow was never very talented with poison."

"Hmm," Oneon said frowning. "I don't think you were even unconscious — you set me up!"

Ron shrugged. "Woodrow was a shy beast, he had to be lured."

"He could have killed me! I thought he had killed you! Why didn't you help me sooner?"

"I did," he winked. "And I wanted to see what you needed to see."



"Which is?"

"It's all inside you, the control, the capability, the fear, all of it — and you can use it or let it go."

Oneon was on his feet, frowning, but silent, searching himself and these recent memories. // He still felt light and a bit free, it was good yet unnerving somehow as if he were a cloud or a boat without anchor and a part of himself wanted to panic and feel anxiety about the times ahead, the tribulations and the people and conversations, but those were whispers in the breeze, in the fog that swirled and sluggishly dissipated, stabbed down by the sun as Woodrow was run through by Ron. The hermit lay face down in a darkening, expanding pool that ate the leaves as it yawned forwards. It was still again, the birds chirped again, the routines of the forest restarted lazily, unimpressed by the human proceedings. The plants bent under their burdens and paid no heed to the hot quickness of animal flesh as they meditated through a different arc of being.

"I want to see Hassan now," Oneon said, churning Onyx back into an hand that he stretched and put down by his side.

Ron's nod was part bow, elegant as usual, although Oneon seemed to see him shake a bit. He probably



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could have told him more about this dead hermit but he was dead, after all, and without concern for retaliation by friends — what did it matter? His life appeared to be inventions for ambush and his end was an old simple trick: playing dead. Oneon wondered, though, how injured Ron really was. He still walked easily enough, effortlessly exuding confidence. Oneon found he admired him, his first idol had turned into his nemesis — how would this one turn out? Everyone wanted something. Everyone wanted something from him. Yet this man was just a henchman. Oneon had a hard time believing that. They were walking again, through these endless woods, the visage running out ahead of them against the retreating fog that fled chuckling into the thick brush. They could have been going in circles for all he knew, perhaps Woodrow's corpse would show up in a while, around the next bend, <sup>beyond</sup> ~~thru~~ the next copse, but no, suddenly the trees opened up into a bowl of a slope. A great spoon seemed to have scooped out the earth or perhaps a meteor had crashed here, it appeared so circular, so well defined yet blurred by time and vegetation. He heard the sound of water down below, hidden by ferns and old logs, stumps and trees congregating



arbitrarily, deep in inscrutable dialog amongst twisted groups and contemplating the pit in solitude, each one had a name, a personality, maybe even a soul - but who could tell and how can a soul be detected. If a tree speaks in the forest but no one is around to understand it, did it speak at all. Perhaps the old and wise and ancient joined root life forces to become these, stretching, leafing, watching, waiting, and rotting. Who could tell?

They climbed down into the bowl, silently. No, Oneon slid along the dirt track that gave way too easily and spent his moments to keep himself from toppling and tumbling down. Ron stepped as though the earth there were perfectly solid and, for him, it was, but bless him, he pointedly ignored the boy's plight, did not even acknowledge it. One stepped, the other skidded and soon they were walking along a trail down the middle, at the bottom, a smooth slope, and Oneon was cold, his palms muddy; he rubbed them together chattering slightly. There was a roaring of water and he could see a creek. There were a dozen or so cabins around <sup>the creek</sup> ~~a moderate~~ and up the face of stone that the water crashed down. Three tiers of height for all the few buildings. It was pretty, but Oneon was not impressed by what he saw. It was neither



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scary nor looked particularly hardy or sound.

"That's it? That's Hassan's hideout?"

"This is where Hassan is now, yes. He doesn't need to hide, he simply is not found. It's difficult to explain. Perhaps he can, if anyone, though I doubt it. He's a bit enamored with his own cleverness." Ron walked him over a quaint wooden bridge, up steps along the cliff face, and brought him to the porch of one of the plain, squat cabins. He knocked briskly and stepped back, beckoning Onean up; the door popped open and a pair of eyes under a fierce black-fringed brow poked out like an owl.

"Ah!" He said, "Lilee's boy, come in come in."

Onean started but Ron put a hand on his shoulder and said, "This is Onean, ~~we~~ I do not know where Bourne is."

"Right right, peculiar," the jet black-haired face ~~set~~ said, beard bristling. His eyes were large, dark, and the effect of his facial hair made him appear to be glaring. A smile appeared, an energetic smile, but it had a most haunting effect combining itself with his intense features. Onean was speechless, instantly intimidated, and quite glad Ron was there next to him.

"Well, I must be off." Ron said and Onean



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gulped, popping out "what? Where? Why?" Then he flushed red with embarrassment, the cards of his hand lay scattered in a bluff doomed from the start against those fierce eyes. They twinkled like sparks in a fire, dark sparks, and he chuckled, Ron did as well, and Orion added his own nervous contribution.

"Injured?" Hassan pointed his head at Ron's hand holding his side. Ron asserted, another fractional bow, and Hassan relieved him. "Go patch yourself up, Shadow, then see if you can't find the other one — I'd prefer the whole set." He winked, but Ron merely withdrew and left Orion alone, protected only by the door which was not fully open and a dwindling sense of calm, that peace now shaken by being so near the city's most wanted, most hated, and most mysterious man — the crime lord himself, the scourge of Core, the blight — the only blight since the raids had ceased and the wars were now only memory and more dates and facts to learn in History class. Hassan was staring at him and Orion felt himself X-rayed, the gaze, those eyes, they could only stare, never watch passively. Despite the hawk-like visage, his voice was decidedly exhibition — smooth or bit braver perhaps.



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"Please, come in," Hassan said stepping aside and opening the door wider. Oneon stepped inside the square room that was filled with pictures, maps, books, and piles of electronics, gadgetry, computers. There were no chairs. The fresh sunlight fell on cushions on the floor, one was in front of a large computer monitor, bespectled with flickering data, and others were about the room in haphazard fashion. "Welcome to my humble abode," he said, swinging his arm expansively over the room.

"This is where you live?"

"For now, until I'm forced to move."

"Where do you sleep?"

"I don't, well, not much anyway. And there is another building with bunks. I spent most of my time here in the office. It doesn't look like much, I can tell you're let down by the expectations of my reputation."

"What do you mean?"

"Am I not considered a terrorist with innumerable atrocities assigned my name? It's okay, I prefer you to be honest and I'll do you the same."

"Okay," Oneon looked around. "Um, I'm actually a little thirsty." He was not looking at Hassan when he said it, the reputation did loom too large, it stood tall but out of sight hidden within those



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piercing eyes. He was reminded of Gravitass who talked with such warmth chillingly cold words. Hassan spoke plainly, smoothly, the sentences sliding out at an almost monotone cadence and he then realized that English was not his native tongue, meaning he was an immigrant as well. That alone was not surprising, it was rather how spectacularly he used the language, spoke it, articulated it, coiled all the syllables together — he had no accent, he generated a perfected sound that native speakers had lost by taking their language for granted. He accepted a glass of water Hassan offered after having filled it from a jug.

"We don't have potable water on tap," he explained rather than apologized. For a boy from the fringe, this made sense — no one but those from the fringe could drink the water that came from the pipes there. He couldn't imagine that river being any more polluted than what he was used to yet many boiled their water to purify it — wow, this was really good water!

"You did not know water could taste good," Hassan acknowledged Oneo's surprised eyes and further greedy slurping. "There are many things your government could do better rather than weapons."

"They tell us this is for our protection."

"Many things cannot be fought with guns, or



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even force. Why did the ancient civilizations die?"

"Flood. Energy was wiped out and it all collapsed."

"Basically yes, but what good was all that energy, what was it being used for? Every one got so caught up in producing alternatives, they stopped figuring out how to utilize it. It became a function of mass production, mass consumption, our only leg, everything in one basket. Meanwhile the powers that were kept on arming themselves with more and more advanced technology, energy hungry technology, in preparation for some great defense or war that never happened."

Hassan was watching him so closely, eyes transfixed, had he blinked? At all? He felt small under that scrutiny, like a child at school, and he could think of nothing else to do but nod. "Don't you want to know why?"

"Why what?"

"Yes, that's better — what. Why is the same why. Motives don't change much in the grand scheme. Why anything? Greed, control, conquest, it's all part of our primal nature that we often pretend is all we have or not at all a part of us."

"You sound like Ron and his philosophizing," Oren stumbled over the word — wandering sleepily if it were correct. But Hassan only laughed merrily



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behind his evil disguise.

"True, I appreciate the honesty. Ron's spirituality melds often with my, uh, pragmatic views." The "uh" was precisely placed as any other word and it prompted, was meant to prompt, Oneon to question.

"What are your views?"

"Core City is rotten and William is a maggot."

Oneon trembled slightly at the ominous words of doom, but he did not doubt then either, he nodded again in ascent. "It's corrupt...?" He had an inkling, his own theories, what he had seen last night, but he wanted to hear it from this man.

"That alone might be fine. Myself, I enjoy the cat and mouse games and I am no revolutionary. Yet fruit is no fun when it's <sup>spoiled</sup> much, flesh stinks when it rots, and William is feeding off this, driven by his own self-loathing, destructive nature. I used to ~~that~~ enjoy our sparring but now it's plain that he is destroying his own position faster than I could ever hope to undermine it. He's mad and committing mass suicide, taking my playground with it."

"How do you know about William?"

"Besides the obvious spies, Lilee came to me for sanctuary after she left him. Perhaps she sensed his madness even then. That is the popular theory



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isn't it? Noble deed in advance, but what she did was wrong, ~~it~~ plainly so, and her motivation might have been a simple fear of commitment. She was so young, younger than him, and one's life appears without end at that age. She was secretive yet I learned a lot about him... and her." He sighed, a simple gesture, not drawn out or particularly sappy.

"I killed her, I killed Lilee." Onean said, out loud, his first big sin and the second of not believing it to be wrong — did he? He thought both things but logically he decided it was right.

Hassan stared through him. "You did." He paused again. "I did not believe it when I heard and I am surprised you admitted it outright. Holding on to that inside can destroy you, perhaps there is hope." He mused, dissecting Onean with the look.

"Do you think it was wrong?"

"Why not ask if I think it was right?"

"Because it is killing someone, it is murder."

"So you already think it was wrong. Your conscience ~~would~~ <sup>will</sup> chastise you worse than anyone. You're not crying, though, so you had your reasons that came after the event. Sometimes our impulses are the truest reflection of ourselves, but sometimes they are just circumstance. For this I will say



that it was, in many ways, bound to happen. You have been set up, from the beginning, to kill your mother and father — and THEY set you up! They are both too emotional to recognize their brilliance."

"They are not related to me."

"Yes, they are, but not directly — no. Sorry to play this card, but we humans are all related and connected, even an old cynic like myself can see that. And what would it matter besides? Is it blood that makes family? You are the spitting image of them, an offspring if I ever saw one, another version of your brother." Onean stiffened, he had not thought about Borne and that better version of him, no, they weren't related but he was the white sheep to Onean's black. He was a reminder to his weakness.

"Ah, yes, ~~the~~ I know he makes you uncomfortable. He was with Lilee, of course, just a small thing..."

"Did you know about Onyx then?" Onean did not want to hear more about golden boy.

"There was something in her possession that must have been Onyx — a sort of glowing ball. Borne always managed to have it in his hand, playing with it, but Lilee would hide it as soon as she noticed it was out."

"Why didn't you try to find out more about it?"



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"To be honest, I don't know — and it didn't really pique my interest. No one was looking for it and William went crazy asking for her, not it."

"But you kept her hidden?"

"Yes, and I arranged her move back into Core City under a new name."

"New name?"

"William would have found her in the registry immediately otherwise. All we did, though, was to use an alternative spelling of Lily which I thought particularly brilliant. She was right under his nose."

"Why did you do all this for her?"

"We had a bit of a history, but that was it for me. I knew she would be involved in important moments, changes, and I wanted to have control, or at least a view, of those pieces. It was not difficult for me, think of it as an investment, and here you are: the dividend."

"I don't owe you anything," Oren said with heat.

"Lilee did and you are one of her heirs."

"Bourne would be who you want, then."

"No, I want you — as everyone does — and your brother is still missing besides... along with your girlfriend I might add." Oren started to protest that as well but Hassan cut him off with a stopping



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look. "Hear me out before you say anything. We want the same things, maybe for different reasons, but still you and I both want William dead and the city restored to a decent governance."

"You want me to kill William so you can go back to business as usual."

"Mostly correct, but it will never be business as usual and I would like to operate from within the city. That's neither here nor there, what I want now is that ~~madman~~<sup>despot</sup> deposed and some semblance of order restored. Otherwise there'll be no chance for any of this surviving what's coming."

"You're not just talking about civilization in danger of imploding are you?"

"No, there are <sup>very</sup> real, ~~dangers~~ pressing dangers to the city in the short term — let's call them external forces. You know that the raiders haven't attacked in a decade? The reason is not the media's explanation that we have won the war. Far from it. The war has not yet begun and with the city tearing itself apart, it doesn't stand a chance."

"Raiders are assembling to attack."

"Not quite, but let's take this one step at a time."

"I don't think I can beat William, he almost killed me last time."



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"You can't, not alone, but that's always the way isn't it?" The scary face smiled, it was not comforting. "Ran will help you, of course, and Sam's defectors — however it will be up to you. I have a, shall we say, "hunch" that only you can achieve this. The coincidence is too strange, maybe William planned this but we can hope we have an edge."

"What are you talking about?"

"He has a secret lab that is heavily guarded and hardly accessible, but we have found one very narrow passage that you should just be able to fit through."

"The catch?"

"It's entirely vertical, a shaft for wires, pipes, air, who knows, and lined with electrified razor wire."

"Uh huh, and why would I jump down that?"

"He's hided up down there and we don't know any other way in at this point. He has his own guards, not kops, protecting it."

"Like Freeman?"

"Just so. We will try to shut off the electricity and your armor should protect you from lacerations."

"Sounds dubious."

Assan spread his hands. "Everything is going to get worse if you don't try. He's insane, but brilliant. and if we don't stop him now..."



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Oreon nodded slowly. "What do you know about this, then, and why it was given to me? Where did I come from?" The questions came tumbling out.

"I'm afraid I don't know much more than Ron told you. Lilee left with Bourne and soon after starting her new life, you appeared but were never registered. That discrepancy, although quite common in the fringe, is probably what led them to find you. As for Onyx, only Lily and William know truly. However, they were working on grants around that time period that were given based on their success with age-grow cybernetics, so we can safely assume that Onyx is a new version of that technology. Certainly I have seen nothing that compares to it. Where ~~a~~ current limbs draw from the host body, yours appears to pull energy from surroundings and obviously it transforms quickly which is unheard of. The big mystery is why he didn't reinvent it from scratch, he's bright enough. Perhaps there is a secret ingredient or a trick that only Lilee knew."

"Okay."

Hassan showed surprise. "Okay?"

"I will ask William <sup>about it</sup> when I see him."

Hassan grinned, scary and fierce. "Excellent, Oreon." They talked a bit more, but no new revelations. Oreon got the impression that Hassan was amoral, not immoral—he made



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his decisions on a basis of fairness and justice that were his own design, regardless of how they fit to society — which they didn't. He seemed to feed off the challenge of operating outside the status quo and yet do so with his own brand of rules, with consistency. He spoke at a constant cadence, never hurried and never without delay. Oron was unable to look away from those eyes, as if it would cause some kind of dishonor or schism between them but Hassan displayed no extreme emotion for him to suppose something might happen yet the calmness made him think of a sleepy, coiled snake — obviously dangerous yet making no overt moves. He could not get comfortable, he was not restless, he wanted to stay but he did not feel at all safe. He was awash with paradoxical sensations that the fierce-eyed, silk-tongued man caused. He wished for Ron to save him, how long had they been talking now? Was Ron okay? He didn't know how serious the wound had been and it was doubtful Ron would ever show it even if it was.

"I'll relieve you now, I can see I am tiring you. Would you like to rest before returning to the city?"

Oron immediately felt a wave of relief followed



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by one of dread. "The city?" He had forgotten to ask WHERE the lab was but secretly hoped it would not be back there, not yet, not so soon. "Is that where William is then?"

"Yes, of course. His lab is a subterranean extension of Central, on the east side of the structure, there is a main entrance of sorts through the recycling reformation center."

"We get in through the dump?"

"Precisely and to The Forge which contains the passage I have told you about."

"I don't know..."

"You'll feel better in some new armor, come with me."

Oneon felt he was following, secretly, a lot. He would have resisted before, unless Bourne had thought it a good idea. Why did he trust this man? No, he did not trust him or most anyone. It was simply time to see what they could offer him as assistance. He still did not know what Hassan ultimately wanted beyond this task and the vague abstractions after. He also knew that meant his intentions might be evil and he was being misled. Yet he trusted Ron and by extension he would go along with this for now. They had told him more than anyone else had, without pretense, and only a modicum of mystery.



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He was shown out onto the shelf of the water fall to another plain, squat building. Hassan pointed out the various purposes of the structures on the way: food, bunks, research, and of course arms. Arms, Oneon thought, a somewhat ironic or coincidental term considering his own firm, his Onyx.

"Why are you showing me all of this, isn't it a secret?" I could tell ... Sam, if I wh..."

Hassan stopped to look at him, bringing his eyes back from the surroundings to root Oneon in place where he stood. "Usually it's best to wait for the gifts of the host before theoretical threats, more profitable that way."

"I didn't mean I would, I was just -"

"You have a dangerous disposition, chaotic even. Maybe it's your youth or something else." He stopped, musing briefly and before Oneon could think to say anything, he continued. "I don't control people and I wouldn't dare try that with you now. I will be honest, why not. I give people choices and I guide them for my own fun and profit, it has served me well. There is nothing binding in what I ask, but if you betray me then all bets are off. I know you think you're powerful. Remember that I have survived much longer than one night



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being hunted and I did not have the benefits of force which you possess."

Oreon went cold, he didn't say anything and he felt a lump in his throat that he wanted to gulp but could not beneath that stare. It tickled and he felt his eyes watering in protest. Ages went by in seconds and then Hassan released him by turning his head, to the door.

"Good," he said simply. "Now, let's give you even more of a chance than one powerful pop gun."

"Boots?" Oreon croaked and then cleared his throat guiltily.

"Ah yes, Ron mentioned you had found a pair. Unfortunately Bourne appears to have taken them for himself, but ~~you~~<sup>we</sup> do have one more set. I must warn you," and here he opened the door, "that they are an experimental version." He peered at him with a fierce twinkle. "That should suit you quite well." He stepped inside and switched on a single, hanging bulb. There were black and brown cases everywhere and a frightening assortment of death devices covering every open space on the windowless walls, shelves of projectiles and smaller cases in the middle, and even things hanging from the ceiling. Oreon saw a crossbow and thought of the farm crew — what had happened



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to them he wondered.

"No locks?" He asked Hassan who was opening a cabinet and pulling out a dusty canvas bag.

"My dear boy, the door is made of wood. As you say we rely on secrecy, but don't think this isn't protected in other ways?"

"Like guards? I haven't really seen anyone..."

"I am here, that's enough," he said mysteriously. "But also, other things and yes there are guards too. I'm not surprised you did not see them otherwise they would be useless to me."

"Why do they work for you?"

"Maybe the usual: money. I leave each to his own motivations, but I offer a challenge to the tired old system that revolutionaries and outcasts cannot resist. It is actually quite easy for me to get the best." He bent down to untie the bag. "And keep them."

"You can't keep Ron," Oron said, a bit more roughly than he intended.

"Oh I know his plans, he is very open. And should he follow through he will probably kill me next — or try."

"Why?"



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"His father was a kop."

"I know."

Hassan shrugged, "I killed him."

Oneon was a bit aghast but he pulled himself together. "Wait a minute, Ron hated his father."

"Indifference. That's worse. And anyway, it's still his father and he's very methodical, ~~he~~ No one could ever accuse him of a trace of guile. His word is pure gold."

"So he's told you this, but you said 'probably!'"

Hassan gave him another petrifying look. "He's going to kill his love, a true love even, and he sincerely believes he will be the same man after that?" Hassan shook his head slowly without removing his eyes. "Either he does not love Sam, which I think he does, or he is going to kill the Ron we know along with her. Now, let's try these on for size..."

The boots he retrieved from the sack were smaller than the others and a scratched, opaque black like a skillet. They had the familiar wide, angular bottom that concealed the special hydraulics and a lined strip up both sides. Hassan sat then on the floor and he stepped in one then the other, but nothing happened and his feet sat loosely inside them.



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"How do I turn them on?"

Hassan scratched his black beard. "All this new stuff has no decent read-outs, just this one meter, and otherwise all automatic. I do believe these recharge in light and we had them stuffed in a bag. Brilliant. You will have to do without them then." He did not sound convincing.

"Can't I wait until they're charged?"

"No, there is no time for idleness now. You used that up with all your theatrics earlier."

Ozeon flushed and with that was a bit of anger, and his trigger, his handle to the power of his arm and drawing power itself. He grabbed it instinctively, recalling his fight with Si-Grid, and held it for a moment. Hassan watched him closely and he returned it with a knowing look of his own.

Then it was not felt to be directed yet he could sense the energy disappear from him, his trunk, his foot, and felt his feet gripped then heel, ankle, and calf. There was a high pitched noise that rose slightly in octave and then settled out, imperceptible into the ambience of the room, indistinguishable from the ringing in one's ears. Ozeon looked down and saw the meter on the side of the boots glowing softly, the top beaming and the boots themselves now



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a blueish black.

"Fascinating," Hassan said, still staring at Oneon and not the boots.

"Why are they blue now?"

"Experimental," Hassan shrugged and spread his hands. "That is not my area of genius. I do know, however, they work under a similar principle as the armor. Did you. They're picking up the color of your jeans. Did you feel the needles?"

"No," Oneon admitted, but when you couldn't see, it was hard to tell what you were feeling — the mind can trick you into anything.

"Hmm," Hassan frowned slightly. "No matter, they will still work at least as well as the others and you won't need to worry about them running out of juice."

They spent the next half hour trying ~~on~~ different armors and helmets, guns and utility devices on Oneon. In the end he decided to keep his old cycle helmet and refused Hassan's offers to have it augmented. He didn't know why he was being sentimental about it, but it did remain the sole possession of his old life, everything else was new — clothes, gloves (or glove, rather, just one), armor, boots... friends. Were any of these his friends now? Did he have any friends before? These notions he was going through helped relieve the anxiety.



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of his task, because he simply wasn't thinking about it. Come to think of it, in the worst situations he wasn't afraid either, not of that situation itself, he feared the outcome, always preoccupied with a future result even if he was in a situation that was the feared result of a previous one. He relaxed, let the air out of his body, and felt the individual needles of the armor retract as it shrank into ~~the~~ shiny ovals on ~~the~~ the jointless parts of his limbs, trunk, and torso. He took off his helmet and scratched his head.

"I'm ready," he said to Hassan and that severe face smiled a reptilian grin behind owl-like hair. Hassan stood and held his hands behind his back. He looked Orion up and down and then checked a pocket watch from the front of his loose, white shirt.

"It's about time," Hassan said.

"And what time is that?"

"Well, it's noon."

"How will I get into the city?"

"Do you need me to give you all the answers?"

"No, I guess not — I know a way."

Hassan nodded. "We'll provide a series of distractions across the city ~~Reef~~ Ron and the detractors will



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meet you at the reclamation center."

"Thanks, I guess. Aren't you going to wish me luck?"

"You have my blessing, that will have to do. I don't believe in luck."

There was nothing else to say. The dialog could run in the circles of story indefinitely but Oneon knew what he had to do and he was afraid but in motion. They walked outside together, by the little stream on top of the waterfall, and he put on his helmet, he felt his adrenaline rise and the armor sink in. Hassan's eyes were upon him and he needed all his energy, all his will power to break free and so he did with one huge thrust and a leap high into the air, the boots shot him up above the tree tops and he could see the city in the distance, the waiting giants, and the king block of stone, Central, under which was his final destination. His internal compass reoriented itself and then he was running, bounding, flying through the forest in a blur, in a straight line, hastily and noisily.



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He found Dick's farm easily enough, it was close to one of his theatrical antics as Hassan had called them. It was not long ago that it happened, in fact it was very short, but it seemed another person had made those mistakes and he burned in embarrassment at his melodramatics, and the last time he had seen Bourne. Now his brother was no longer his oppressor, but a reminder of his old, sad and lonely and whining self that he would bury. Yes, in spite of it all, inexplicably perhaps, he wished he could wipe Bourne away but maybe never seeing him again would be good enough. He had "saved" Oneon when saving wasn't necessary, taken his stuff, and left ~~him~~ <sup>Oneon</sup> for whoever would find him. Yes, he had been rescued by Bourne from destroying Gravitas sooner, but he had not seen him. And he felt anger at that intervention, not relief. As usual, ~~B~~ Bourne had to come off better than him, even when this time he was just hanging on to his coat tails.

"Oneon?" He heard, he ~~was~~ was walking up to a cluster of buildings, the compound where the workers lived. The familiar voice came from a small guard house by a gate set into a razor-wire fence. A more defensible wall must have been



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destroyed long ago, remnants of it were patched into the wire fence which connected the bits like spider webbing.

"Rosco?" He said uncertainly, ~~the~~ names weren't his thing.

"The very same," Rosco said, now outside the guard house, and bowing with a flourish [what does he look like?] <sup>look like?</sup>

"Are you here for Dick?" He barely concealed a grin against the might of his facial muscles, enough pressure for a bomb, Oneon expected an explosion, imminent.

"A pussy will do," he responded nodding towards the joker. He wanted to blush, he probably did, but he reminded himself he was a new person, a better person, and he could walk this path as well as anyone. It was satisfying that Rosco laughed, he burst like a grenade, and saliva shrapnel watered Oneon's helmet and his eye. He picked at it with his finger and felt himself grabbed by the shoulders and shaken when he had his eyes closed.

"Well done, ~~and~~ I didn't think you had it in you — and no need to make THAT joke, I know what you're thinking."

"It's nice to see you too..."

"Nice? It's a miracle for either of us! How in the hell did you survive that massacre at Central? We figured you were embroiled in that mess."

"What?"



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"Where, ... what the fuck have you been doing if not fighting with that fancy fucking gun of yours."

"Let's go talk to Dick, I need ... well, can you just show me to him." They were walking inside now, down a street, gravel, that led to all the buildings facing a center, laid out in a circle. Oneon looked side to side but saw no people. If it were an area for tumbleweeds, he probably would've seen those roll across in a whistling wind ... except there was no air stirring either, just a silent sun beating down heatless, heartless, showing up for work without working.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, little hero," Rosco's voice was no longer so friendly, in fact it had a veneer of sinister intent or a veiled threat, it was difficult to tell which side he was holding back.

"I should be asking you where Dick is, but you don't bloody have any idea."

"What are you talking about?"

"You inspired our dear old leader with your conspiracy theories and seeing as everyone loved that ~~old~~ bastard, they all rallied to him ... and that's the last I saw ... of any of them."

"Any?"

"That's right, they all left following his banner as



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he followed your sorry ass to Central, where we all figured you were going. I heard the fighting from here, not that well, but I could. All the way out here, and we, I saw the top of that building pop like a fucking piñata but... but the radios went dead along with -"

"Every one? Someone must have survived."

"You're the first bloody returner and you weren't even there."

"And you were?"

"Hey, you little shit, someone had to guard the children those idiots decided to orphan."

"And the women?"

"This ain't the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they do what they want. Some stayed, sure, but even my stupid wife, even she - she..." He lost his machismo in that instant and horror registered in his eyes, his face went slack and appeared extra boney. "Where were you?" His eyes were pleading. "Why didn't you help? He thought you were some kind of fucking leader of the revolution and he was playing general, but you're not. You're not... you're just a spoiled brat with an expensive set of toys. Does it even mean anything to you?"

Oren squeaked almost imperceptible he felt a



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weight on his chest. "Does what?"

"This! Everything! Those people dying to protect you. My wife..." Oneon did not see the tear braving those stark cheek bones and losing itself in the forest of his beard, but he heard the voice tremble and he wanted to disappear, he wanted armor that would shield himself from it, he wanted a weapon that could deathlessly wipe it away, render it harmless, but it slashed deeply into him. Rosco was not a soldier, not even a fighter or a good guard, but he was a person feeling loss and Oneon felt the hurt of it, felt the ~~lost~~ loss as if it were one of his own.

"There must be survivors," he said weakly.

"Thanks," Rosco said sardonically, nodding his head mechanically. "Thank you for that and all that you've done, that you do. Now do us all a favor and turn yourself in before more people. before more..." He couldn't finish.

"Okay." He looked at Rosco who was staring suspiciously and surprised at him. "Where do I go, will you take me there?"

Rosco shook his head, said nothing.

"Oh."

"I never liked you Oneon, and you made a very



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bad first impression."

Anger found its way in, wound its way up his spine, raised his hackles and his guilt was consumed in its fire. His forehead got hot, his eyes watered, and he had trouble keeping his voice from wavering: "You coward."

Rosco glared at him and nodded towards his cannon. "Are you going to shoot me then? Fat lot of good it will do you. Can you do anything besides destroy? We were all doing fine before you slowed up with your problems."

"I'm trying to end this, I was going to ask for your help, for Diet's help."

"But now what? You can end this by giving up your childish crusade. What do you think they're going to do? Chop you up, dissect you? This is it the barbaric past, it's time to live in the present, in the future."

"Not everyone agrees." His armor went up, he was visibly shaking now, he wanted so much to squash this bug, this dog, this whelp — what had HE done to help anyone except complain? Then again... that sounded familiar... but these were different circumstances! There was revolution brewing beneath the present danger and no one could afford to sit around and do nothing.

"Paranoid idiots." Rosco was saying through Orion's



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thoughts. "It's been perfect for a decade and there have been no problems...until you." Rosco pulled out a shotgun and aimed it at Oneon's face. They were in the center, near a copse of trees, a pleasant pool and a picturesque well. It was a beautiful Fall day, it was Oneon's birthday, and it was a showdown. Oneon saw his own arm, his gift, destroyer, canon, pointed at Rosco's face, and he wondered if it was self-defense or if his instinct was to kill. He didn't quite remember raising his arm. It was so quiet. Would he pull the trigger, was he wandering about himself or Rosco? He struggled to find control in himself and there seemed to be no handle for it, like the non-existence of a muscle to pull in an eyebrow or behind the ear. Some people could diffuse themselves but he could not find that capability in himself. He realized he had not been brave, had not faced any fears. All of these dangers that he fought had been on an automatic impulse, an aptitude, and he didn't like it...but he wanted it. He was not bloodthirsty, but he wanted to blow this arrogant face off, this weakling who could not know, in his ignorance the danger he put himself in whether he fired or ignored the sins of the world. It was childish because this man was like



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a child, no concept of reality, couched in innocence.

"Do you think you're faster? Are you waiting for me?" Rosco's words spilled out hastily. This must have been emotional, unplanned, and Oneon could at least relate to that. "Kops will be here at any moment, so you'd better make a move." They could not see out of the compound from here and Oneon ~~had~~ regretted just waltzing in as he had.

"They'll kill you too, you know."

"No. No, they wait. Delusions of grandeur."

"I don't have time for this." That was true. The longer this went on, the more time William had to plot, prepare, defend, and the odd chance he had would slip away. He didn't wait for a response, there was a rippling shimmer, a buzzing reverberation, and a cyclonic blast issued from his canon. There were enough moments in the time he entered to see the eyes of his adversary widen and then squeeze shut and there was a snap and a click of the trigger, but it was too late. The shotgun spun out of Rosco's hands as he toppled to the ground and Oneon lowered his arm cannon as Rosco came to rest. He looked down. "I'm leaving," he said. "Don't be here when they show up."

"What did you do?" Rosco croaked sitting up,



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hair and dirt mingling.

"Same as before. You have a really bad memory. Maybe I wasn't so bad as you think."

Rosco wiped char off his face and stared at it with <sup>on</sup> his fingers. "I thought I was dead."

"Me too, but I'm glad I didn't kill you."

"Why?"

"I don't want to kill anyone," he said off the top of his head and realized that was true as well. Maybe his impulses weren't so bad. "On second thought, stay here, I'll draw them off."

"You - can't."

"Why not?"

"There's only one of you and they're probably using our tunnel as well as overland - so you can't escape. I ... I'm sorry. Maybe I was wrong, but I think you're wrong. I ... you just make me so angry, things were so great and now - chaos."

Oreon was more uncomfortable towards this outpouring of feelings than he had been to the stand-off. He merely nodded nervously, trying to think of a plan, trying not to think about this man's therapy. Why were people so complicated, so weird? Why was he opening up to Oreon when a moment ago they were about to shoot each other in the face?



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"Is there a place to hide, the people here?"

Rosco looked abashed and relieved to ~~change~~ change the discussion to these matters. He shook his head, "There's too many, but why would the kops want to hurt them?"

Oneon shrugged. "Witnesses...or just because. It might not be kops and William is quite mad."

"You're right, sir. They both jumped at the smooth voice. It came from Rosco's chest.

"E?"

"Yes, sir. I'm afraid I could not answer sooner, ~~it~~ these are busy times, you understand. We've been intercepting this signal and have only just verified our exclusive access to it."

"You heard everything?"

"Yes, sir. And may I say, on a personal note, how proud I am. I'm sure Sam would convey this too, but she is occupied."

"E, what should we ~~do~~ do about the incoming kops?"

"Give them a warm welcome, sir."

"Shoot them? But I thought..."

Laughter crackled through the radio. "Please do not fire on our soldiers, sir. They are your escort."

Oneon burst into relieved laughter himself and helped the bewildered Rosco to his feet. It seemed



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to be the first time luck truly smiled on him. It went on too. They learned that the defectors had welcomed the farm militia and more support was coming in from other farms thanks to Dick. There had been many casualties, Rosco's wife however, was not only alive, but on her way as part of the escort. Radio contact was sparse because they had difficulty securing it. There was a constant cat and mouse battle going on around Central, but both sides appeared to be waiting for something. Oneon knew it was him. And the last massive firefight had been when he had destroyed Gravitas and the dome on top of Central exploded brightly like a popped balloon. // Rosco was not happy with Oneon, but he was at least mollified and after the conversation with E ended, they stood in silence looking at nothing in particular. It was still a while before their friends arrived and there wasn't anything to do but wait. Oneon, however, was too anxious to be off and he was adding nothing here.

"I'm going ahead," he said to Rosco.

"Will you show me the tunnel?"

"What? Oh yes..." All the spark had gone out in this man when what he believed, even though it was something terrible, turned out to be untrue. Now



he was listless, distracted. Was he deciding something in his mind or just letting his mind melt under the cold Autumn sun? Sometimes, most times, when we wish to idle, our eyes tell a lie of activity, staring always whereas one can never ~~tell~~<sup>see</sup> with the other senses; only our eyes must close, everything else is always open. And so when we wish to sit and exhale with our being, not to think any great thoughts, but rather to perch on the wall of our consciousness and watch the <sup>clouds</sup> thoughts drift by, well — then our eyes may lie in their openness. People may think we are thinking, especially if we should, especially if there is much to think about. And Oneon thought all this and said nothing while Rosco gathered himself and showed him down into the tunnels. He explained the junctures, the turns he should make, markers to look for, and so on, and of course he would wait here, wait for... his wife, he added dreamily. As in a dream he was waking, he was coming back to life after a nightmare that persisted in a different manifestation than he had assumed. He had picked up his shotgun, even though it no longer worked, and was fiddling with it as he talked. He leaned it against his shoulder. He gave it a long hard look, but Oneon did not know what he was scrutinizing and he left him there to it. He left



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down the awful tunnel, under the beautiful day, into the throat of fate, down the barrel like a reversed bullet sent back to correct a mistake.

The last time he was here, in these, he was headed towards an unknown threat, now it was an unknown alliance. He was accepting help at every turn but the last, the end, well that would be his alone. He thought of that rail monster SoGrid and his chest ached in response, a wound that was no longer there — visibly.

He faced along until soon he encountered his escort, a surprisingly well-equipped dozen or so people, in normal "hard" armor and armed with an assortment of rifles, pistols, and one crossbow.

"I had to see you for myself," Dick said with a smile. Oneon returned it gratefully, he didn't know how he would approach these people otherwise and he felt he could defer to Dick as a pseudo-leader, or at least a liason. "Couldn't wait for us, son?"

"There's no time to lose and all that."

"Yes yes, that's true. Here let me introduce you to this team." And he said the names of each person which Oneon repeated as he shook hands and immediately forgot. Their expressions were mostly grave resolve, serious minds and serious faces. Their world was

coming apart at the seams, so why shouldn't they be serious. Oneon did not feel he could measure up to the kind of hero these faces, so serious, demanded, but he knew he had no choice, or rather, this was the only one that made sense. There was one face that was beaming, a woman's, and he discovered her to be Rosco's wife. She frowned a bit when he told her Rosco had remained, that he had come alone, but then shrugged it off "This is more important than a domestic squabble."

And so they were off, on an ungainly rail barge like the one he had been a prisoner on before. They rode in silence, mostly, except for clipped questions, clipped comments. Oneon told Pick they had to go ~~to~~ to the Reclamation Factory (Refactory).

"Ah, the dump, yes Sam is leading a force there now that we shall meet up with."

"Wait William figure out ~~what~~ <sup>what</sup> we're doing?"

"He's no dummy, he already knows we're out for his head, but neither is Sam so brash as to draw too much attention." He watched the tunnel go by.

"I hope," he added.

William seemed to be consolidating his forces around Central and so the Detractors had taken



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control of the railway checkpoints into the city. Time stretched out anxiously and after an excruciating forever, they were in the city limits after an instant. There were tunnels all the way to the Refactory so they were able to head on without going to the surface. Oren was beginning to feel claustrophobic and the memories of the grisly bloodbath did not help, but he was amongst friends — a friend at least and this helped him relax.

"When we get there," Dick told him and the others. "I expect there is going to be significant resistance but unfortunately that's all I can tell you. Sam had never really checked out the Refactory but it's where old technology is recycled, so you can figure on bots."

"Dust Bots," a woman said. "I was there once dropping a shipment off this rail line and I saw the bastards. Ha, but really they might be harmless to us — all they did when I was there was selectively eat scrap garbage, peeling circuitry away from base metals and such, and crap out fresh bars of pure material. Ominous looking buggers, like ants or something swarming the place, but harmless I think."

"How then, to the place?"

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"No, not other than the kops at the checkpoints. Really there didn't seem to be any security whatsoever."

"Hmm, well let's not get our hopes up. That just means there's a bigger surprise — even if it's nothing."

She nodded and they all began checking and re-checking their equipment as they neared what was colloquially referred to as the dump. Oneon just watched in a daze. He didn't care about dumps or robots.

A light appeared at the end of the tunnel and remained an anxious pinpoint until very suddenly blooming into the outside world. The dump was below the level of the city standard and so there would be no climbing up to it, they were just there. This was expected yet jolted them still and Oneon felt very exposed with the light caressing him after so long underground without it. It seemed to hold more mystery and possible maliciousness than the simple concealment of the darkness they had just left. And the expectation of danger was not without justification, the punctuation of that coming with a popping explosion that preceded a chandelier tinkling of shrapnel returning to earth and several of the people with Oneon dropping with screams or swears. It was the only moment necessary to see more cubes of explosive promise hurling towards them from short,



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innocuous-looking dust bots. Onean's heart lept in his chest, adrenaline peaking with the transformation of Onyx and an unclear idea of stopping the meteor shower of trash grenades spinning, deadly boxed gifts, in the air, suspended in his mind and this time that he sidestepped, slowing down, ~~tripping~~ delayed, only his breathing felt normal, his heart, and he pondered then if in reality he was panting and his heart thundering instead of this quiet, steady march to fate. The preliminary round had only bounced off the plates of his armor, what would this shower do? He first decided to act and let the consequences be dealt with as they occurred.

CTCHUNG! As he stepped forward, the side of the barge shot up in response to Dick pulling hard on a lever at the back, his left arm holding his side, his face bent in a determined grimace. There were several metallic thuds and as many popping sounds; they all ducked in response to the debris flying upwards, some over the shield wall.

"Jesus!" Dick exhaled angrily. "I guess those bastards aren't so harmless, that was a sour welcome!"

There was no response, no joke, and Onean felt the hole Rosco left as keenly as Dick probably felt the wound in his side. Sarah, the one who had been there before, was apologizing and trying to make

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up for it with new predictions in a hurried voice. She told them they weren't that large and couldn't have much capacity to fire ~~the~~ more.

"Well, they'll be on this side any moment and we're not stopped yet," Dick began but then there were hollow, tube shots that stopped him and they saw more arcing above them in the air, perfectly calculated to land among them. Oneon did not wait to see the looks on their faces, their hands going to cover them, pray, or reach too slow for weapons. He didn't know who was wounded or how bad. He didn't wait for a command. He fired on instinct and it rushed from him, through him, shimmered to the onlooker, and ~~the~~ focalized to reverberating blasts from his arm cannon. It appeared that they all exploded into melting showers of light that faded in suffering defeat against the blue sky, but he shot them one by one in rapid succession. Frothy sparks rained down on them, hot and stinging but far from murderous.

"Return fire!" Dick commanded, wasting no time in surprise, and they dutifully swung their weapons over the shield wall to shoot at the dust bots. Unfortunately this did little since they resembled the trash and parts they consumed and they were so care-



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flanged as to be invisible. Bullets spit up dust and rang out on scrap metal, but it could not be said they made any right dents in their ambushers. Oneon did not participate in the attack but scanned their surroundings instead.

Heaps of pieces and parts, collectively trash, formed literal hills that rose and fell with varying height and definition in an almost cartoonish horizon of old world waste, old world archaeology. Here was both the treasure and garbage of a century or so ago gathered, sifted, and fed to the Core City government ~~to~~ for new parts, new construction, and new junk, supposedly for the benefit of its citizenry. The machines no longer existed to fabricate many things so they were harvested from this bounty which seemed to have no end and the visage was of an impossible amount of pure stuff, the result of zealous overproduction and belief in exponential economy and reuse and repair rejected in favor of repurchasing. Somewhere in this mess were short menaces topped by vert-like vacuum heads on miniature sorting and mashing facilities that had apparently also been fitted with the ability to create shrapnel bombs out of the garbage they ate. They ran on tracks and had a single arm for balance and to pick out choice pieces to consume, which had

also all of their sensors for detection and analyzation.

They all then ducked back behind the wall for protection to reload and almost by clockwork there was another barrage of presents tossed at them. They had, it seemed, a prerogative but very little imagination.

Oreon didn't particularly want to continue this kind of trench warfare indefinitely but again he blasted the projectiles ~~take~~ out of the sky. Dick meanwhile checked on his troops and it appeared there was only one for whom they could do nothing except watch die. Then again, pride may ~~be~~ have kept the others from admitting they were too injured, maybe also mortally. No one wanted to quit, this was a hardcore group, the escort of the boy hero. He watched in fascination while Dick said prayers over the woman breathing shallowly, wakening in the seconds the others were returning fire. This soldier's face held onto an expression, gripped it into riga mortis and death, of grim defiance and hope. An undying hope etched onto a proud corpse that Dick knelt over with tears on his grizzled cheeks and waving in sparkles from his eyes, an audience of his spirit in water sprites hailing the passing of a comrade, the drying of a body, the ultimate mystery of its path and destination. Yet he also held an expression that was, at its root, or



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of confident optimism.

"It was really good to know you," were the dying woman's words sent into those shining eyes. Dick's prayer faltered at that and a "damn" slipped in but he completed his work and laid her down gently on the rail car bed, her death bed. A great clatter arose then behind them, the sound of sliding steel and several familiar popping sounds, and then Ron was standing there, above the wall edge in his height, and scanning the horizon as he spoke.

"They nearly had you surrounded. You need to move now."

"How many are there?" Dick asked, their voices rushed but level, he left his eyes glassy, cheeks wet.

"More than you, by far," came the usual arbitrary response. "I will draw them, you cover me." He looked briefly but directly and pointedly at Oren and swung over the wall ~~then~~ with a single deft motion without waiting; the thudding of new fodder had already begun.

Mounds of trash reared up and rectangular maws vomited bombs, mostly at Ron, some at Fran. They fired on the targets as quickly as possible and Ron cut many down with his sword but many more kept popping up. It was as if they were being born

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right there, in the trash, from the trash and sweat beaded on Oneon's forehead as the claustr of his victims lagged further from his aim and lurched ever closer to its prey. Ron appeared unconcerned in a way, he was concentrating but his brow was slack and he moved in sweeping grace from strike to ~~slide~~ slide to slash and so on in what may have been a detailed choreographed dance yet what had to be improvisational survival - right? In that visage, it truly appeared as though Ron had his hand directly on fate and steered it through this intense yet flowing ballet of swordsmanship and little robots being cut and stabbed to... death? Do robots die? If energy is never destroyed and another ~~one~~ robot inherits the energy later - is it reincarnation?

There were too many, by far, just as Ron had said. Oneon was losing to their population which only seemed to grow for each one he shot down. The whole trash pile, the mountain, quivered as if it were made of them... or producing them. He might have been able to think further on that, to come up with some sort of plan, but all his mental energy was focused on the bots and bombs clouding his vision. The air was filled with sparks, alit or dripping smoke and



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dead metal, dust and firepower, swords and ... Wait, there were more. They ~~sudden~~ had more allies that may have materialized out of thin air for all Oneon was able to concentrate on their arrival. San's plumed helmet loomed above the carnage, ~~the~~ the crest of it dashing about like the fin of a shark, her hair following in its wake and swift arcs of the sun blade cutting a path. It severed plate and wire with the ease of the hottest blow torch and the pieces of its victims wrinkled and folded outward, melted, flopping steel cloth, skin split, and they fell soundlessly or rather screamlessly. The only voices, in fact, were those of the soldiers yelling out targets, swapping ammo, and roaring with battle cries. San and Ren traded bare insults to spar as they battled and both faces bore childish grins of delight although the influx of friendly assistance did not appear to be turning the tide so much as increasing the madness of the struggle.

E was there too, swinging his fists out from his barrel-like chest to smash them into his adversaries. They crunched up, mortally damaged and wriggled fitfully, cans of soda squashed but not yet empty. He bobbed and weaved around the attacks, sometimes drawing out a baton for extra reach and

leverage but still relying mostly on his hands. He even managed to say hello to Oneon with a curt nod of his head and a brief lock of the eyes. Oneon assumed a dry "sir" would have been affixed if it were verbal. And still it was not enough. Oneon's heart raced but everyone fought bravely and without desperation and his racing heart filled for them. He did not want them to die here.

He stopped firing, it was useless anyway, and drew deep inside himself from the well there. The sounds became muffled, perhaps his hearing was damaged, he hoped time was moving slower but everything was a blur, he forgot most of it, he didn't look and he didn't see. His senses withdrew into that sanctuary of eternal freedom, yet for him it was not empty; there were switches there, handles, not mechanical, ~~but~~ something he could grip like the way one knows a muscle without using it, but he did not know what these did. He had only used one mostly, consciously, and that was getting them nowhere. He thought he heard concerned shouting, his name, but they were shouting for no one, he was monetarily not there, he did not know how long he would be gone. He didn't know if he had his eyes closed or where he was. He didn't know exactly what he was doing. This was not a plan, ~~or~~ maybe it was an act of faith, he



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just had an intuitive need, an opening, an opportunity. He felt an infinite set of choices after the helplessness of their fight. Something here would change things, might change him. When we open some doors they are one-way and we can only see back through them. He concentrated in a mental freefall and pulled and knew then, he saw it with strange shimmering eyes and he scraped up the past and brought it to this moment, in the air, his right fist raised and it looked different than he remembered but he was not looking at it.

Oneon leapt into the sky above the turmoil and everything attacking followed him, unwillingly, as they too took flight, gravitating towards a mirage-like sphere of disturbed atmosphere around Onyx. Junk crept out of piles and bots waved their sensor arms uselessly and bombs reversed their fall and all his friends or allies or people who had accompanied him just stared. As he appeared to reach the top of his massive arc, so too did it seem he had gathered all their adversaries into one squirming ball before him and he spun, there was a flash, a reverberating crunch and boom, and he sent the mess of it soaring out over the horizon as he began his descent which ended in a hydraulic hiss and loud

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crunch and one hand to steady himself. Steam fled his body and he coughed ~~suddenly~~ into his right hand, stared at it, and then wiped it away into the dirt of the ground.

One of the hills sagged and split as a giant groaning door opened into a yawning blackness and fire. There was a throttled winding sound of a gigantic motor thrown into low gear and from this hellish darkness a saw blade flew out, sized to match the sounds, and made a circle amongst them before returning inside. Someone screamed, Dick yelled for cover, and Oneon was lifted hastily by Sam and Ron.

"Cutter!" Ron said tensely as they dumped him with them behind meager cover. Sam was about to retort, but Ron cut her off. "Big, dumb, indestructable... maybe." He did not lie but the last bit felt tacked on.

"We have to go in there," Oneon said.

Ron nodded.

"Then it's time for me to show up."

"Shit, what are we - chopped liver?" Sam added.

"Let's see how indestructable this fucker is."

In response was the loud spinning noise and the sawblade, fully the size of Oneon in diameter, erupted from the doorway and he could see a sticky blackness.



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on it in passing that he knew was blood. It made him angry and as it returned he rolled to his feet and chased it in, his boots spitting up dust and trash and he entered the Reclamation Factory.

Conveyors, everywhere. Hooks moving, flickering fires melting something. Familiar pops and booms, he felt a sting, many stings, and heard scrapes on his armor, he had his gun out, firing, sweeping, and his mind was free to think, to loot. At the end of this cavernous room, like a dragon in a treasury, was a monstrous titan of sharp, angled metal and one brightly glowing visor that must be its eye. <sup>Cutter</sup> ~~It~~ appeared as a giant, hunched skeleton of beams moving in ~~un~~ coordination, gears. It was the heart of a building, the skeleton, taken down and repurposed into a huge, glaring being. Oneon imagined the buildings of his city having souls and this one was sinister, a poltergeist, the rest having been shed and the structure smaller, yet still a building, still too big, and he couldn't tell if Cutter was made to hunch or if it was because the ceiling was not tall enough.

He charged up and he charged. Before the blade was caught by Cutter's outstretched limb, Oneon hit it with a powerful blast that sent it clattering to

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the floor. He jumped up, pulling his arm back to strike, and quicker than he anticipated Cutter swung his whole torso and whacked him with his other arm, a taban-like fist. As Oneon toppled backwards, watching his feet and the ceiling, he saw Sam<sup>and</sup> Ron<sup>and</sup> rush past him on either side and make hard but ineffectual slashes with their swords.

"Got you, sir!" He heard E say amicably as he landed in his arms, somewhat embarrassed. He mumbled a thanks as he got his footing back. Sam and Ron danced around the beast hacking sparks from it and Cutter initially tried to fend them off, swinging parts of his body on gears that made him appear a Rubix cube, limbs shooting and spinning yet somehow dodged. He gave up this tactic and almost delicately bent over and picked up the saw blade, affixing it to the firing device on his left arm. Sam and Ron fell back to E and Oneon.

"Get ready!" Sam shouted just before the blade flew at them. Sparks jumped off it in the sounds of bullets ricocheting, some of the soldiers had peeled off from fighting the dust bots to join them. The blade flew incredibly fast and low. It seemed to have its own system of guidance and made an unnatural sweep of them which they barely escaped from. One of



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the soldiers was not so lucky and screamed at the severed limbs he now bled from. Oneon was disoriented by it, the screaming, this blade, the undefeatable titan Cutter glaring at them with his one long visored eye. And so when the sablode returned, preceded by the mean wailing, he stared dumbly at it, not hearing the shouts, not feeling the pain in his chest, not even raising his gun. Was he concussed? Is this what a concussion felt like? He actually took the time to wonder until he felt the wind knocked out of him, pain filled him, and he was staring again at the ceiling but his feet were not there. The world was returned to him and he had been cut in half - no, he saw he was intact as he came out of the daze, but there was more screaming. This time it was not abstract, it was a name, a letter, and it was Sam. It was followed by a string of curse words and Cutter wasted no time in resending his sablode towards the general bent over E, part of E. Ron lifted her nimbly out of harm's way and Oneon too managed to roll away and to his feet.

He didn't need to think this time. He gripped the anger and there was a message inside it, another intuition, and he accepted it without question. He

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stood directly in front of Cutter, ~~that~~ fired at his visor... which did nothing perceptible, and then he turned and ran for the door, to outside. He heard winding, he heard the sawblade fired at his back, but he ran faster. His chest was on fire and his arm felt hot and he spun on his heel and shot. He slipped too and slid on his legs backwards as he fired this shot. It was different than before, like a flare and it missed the sawblade by inches and embedded itself ~~in~~ in Cutter's chest. But the blade kept coming and it rejected all the returned fire with fitful sparks and indifferent spinning as it bore down on Oneon. Yet it slowed and slowed and still fast it approached him right to his face where its pace forward ceased while it spun and spun and just barely touched his face where it nicked the flesh off his turned cheek and made him scream in pain. Then it jettied backwards towards Cutter, but not towards his arm which he flailed about in front of the flaring thing on his chest, the destination of his sawblade.

There was a tremendous metallic groan and shriek as the blade lodged itself deep into his chest. Cutter flung at it pitifully but with weakening movements and black liquid sprayed out from new seams, new cracks, and the proof of his mortality, destructibility.



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"Fucker!" Sam was there in an instant, standing on his hunched shoulders, the Sun Blade raised above her head, glowing, charged, and she drove it down into his visor. Chains of lightning burst out with his black blood that caught fire like napalm and Sam twisted the sword, ~~giving~~ Cutter a few final twitches before he sank down into a messy heap. They managed to close the door and sweep the factory room free of dust bots. They gathered around E who gave them all a simple smile, a half-smile, a smile of one who has accepted both doom and pity but is dominated by neither. He took all their sad faces so well, ~~he~~ He had been cut diagonally and his torso now only had one arm. Cheon did not see any blood.

"Best of luck, sir." He said to Sam. "There is a door at the back that leads to ~~the~~ Forge. It's probably locked, but that shouldn't be a problem."

"Shut up, E, we know," her eyes were filled with sympathy.

"I know, sir, I just don't like being the center of attention."

"Too bad for that and I didn't know you disliked anything."

"There's no point hiding my preferences now, sir."

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I won't be around much longer to make people uncomfortable by them. Anyway, I have something for you now that we have a moment."

"Yes?" The word ecked out with some difficulty.

He reached into his breast pocket with his one arm and drew out a small, square object. "I managed to save a copy of the security cameras at Control before William had them erased. This was the local disk. As you know the data is not put on the network just in case there is a malicious entity controlling it, so..."

"Thank you, E," she took the tape. "Although I kind of like being outside this fucked up establishment."

"This will clear your name."

"Yes."

"For... when... you win... sir." He closed his eyes and sighed. Sam, who held him up, bent her head over him and her hair spilled out over her face, covering them both. Ron put one hand on her back, also bent his head forward, and said nothing. Oron left them and went to the back of the room where he found a double door meant to slide open, parting. A panel on the side was lit up. Above the keypad was a face in the screen. It was smaller than before, the screen therefore the face.

"I'm coming for you," Oron said to it.



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"Good," the voice was small and distorted. "Don't keep us waiting, you've made enough trouble already." A green light ~~appeared~~ <sup>switched</sup> on by the panel and the doors parted revealing a concrete passage. The face was gone. Fluorescent lights gave the passage an antiseptic look of plainness. Ominous plainness. Always something next and Ureon could feel a dry heat... Forge. It reminded him of the lava in the streets. To hell again, he thought. And he went in without looking back. To hell with it.

The heat gave way to occasional coolness, the breaths of spirits, those mysterious pockets of refreshing air where they're not supposed to be. They were very welcome, because meanwhile there were no vents and the atmosphere was stifling claustrophobic, even worse than when he had been underground on the railway. He felt dizzy and at the anxious edge of panic. His footsteps, his boots, made echoing clamping sounds that bounced around and lost definition until there was just a constant staticco that rattled in his head. The heat grew with his apprehension and, so, he couldn't do this. He would have to go further down, further underground, and that was impossible. He was already too weak, this was too much, and William was expecting him so the surprise Hassan hoped for although hope probably

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isn't the best word for it, that hope was already gone and replaced by its counterpart: fear. More doubt crept in with each footstep, each footfall weighed down by that increasing tar of excuses, reasons to back off. He would regroup with his friends then, yes, and come up with an acceptable plan, something with a better chance. He had slowed to a shuffle already, heart thumping, would that ever give him peace, and a stray hair hung out of his helmet in his face. He stopped altogether, took off his helmet, brushed his hair back and didn't put it back on; he held it with his right hand. What was he doing? This was pure suicide. He decided to go back, to turn around, to tap his friends' minds. Sam and Ron and E had done this before... E. How could it have just happen and he already forgot? His fear clouded out the memory of the person who just recently saved his life, gave him this chance to tuck tail and run. E had not thought of anything better, he acted in faith and haste, he stuck to the intent, the motivation, plan be damned. No, there were always innumerable reasons for not doing something. In this he knew he had to do it, he had to go. Maybe his fear was afraid of him, afraid of his success, or just his ability to live without it. Well, he was still scared but the thought of E put steel in his spine and he broke



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into a sprint. Running actually seemed to give him energy, instill confident optimism, stick to his guns. Ahead the passage way split into a T and Kops flooded from both sides, rifles at shoulders, orders to fire, the staccato of footsteps became drowned in the ear-splitting roar of gunfire, chipping stone, and whizzing bullets. Orion snapped back into a slide and fired but something strange happened. There seemed to be a ~~at~~ billow of air pushing him from behind and it rushed forward past him, nearly faster than the bullets, and all the projectiles went haywire and all the Kops were knocked flat. Orion continued firing short blasts and a hole appeared in the opposite wall where the ventilation shaft, or whatever it was, was. He didn't have time to think or turn or anything else, he merely completed his slide into that rabbit hole and began to fall down the shaft.

It was narrow and he slammed against the edges with painful friction. He had ~~the~~ one arm raised awkwardly above him and the other at his side. This hole was not uniform and sometimes an edge struck him. Then he felt a sting and another and on his forehead and he tasted blood. There was some kind of pain or worse (how could it be

better?) draped along the edges, cutting into him, and the hole was shrinking. He felt his armor disengage and a second later it was ripped off him and the tearing sounds he hoped were his clothes. He heard only rustling and his heart pumping blood to his wounds. He wanted to suck in his face and sensitive parts to keep them from catching. All he could think about was pieces of him taken away in scrapings and then getting stuck in this hole, a plug at the bottom where he would die trapped and alone. He kept his feet together, afraid of catching with one and breaking it or his groin. He couldn't get the nightmarish thoughts out of his head, imagination be damned! Panic rose in him, it couldn't be held at bay, but he knew he couldn't move. He began firing downward and felt the heat sear his right side.

And then he dropped into an uneven floor and somehow caught himself from falling. It was a thump and a wet slapping as his blood landed with him. The armor was gone... and then ~~it~~ it fell on his head, his helmet and knocked him over. He breathed a sigh of relief and somehow found his wounds were not all that egregious, it was all in his head, probably from the phobic fear of being trapped. He struggled into his armor, the scratches he sustained stinging,



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and he ~~was~~ marveled at how such simple cuts could cause him more grief than being impaled or shot.

He was in a cave, there was simply no other description for it. Stalagmites, stalasmites and dripping water somewhere and lights stuck into the rocks at odd angles and a quite uneven floor. It terminated in this little room, if one could call it that, and he could not see the hole he had come through, it blended with the other shadows. There was only one way to go so he steeled himself and began to walk determinedly down that passage, stalking it like a lion does unseen prey in the grass. Climbing over the rough floor kept his mind occupied, to be balanced and prepared, but he still suffered a good shock when two large, glaring red eyes lit up in the darkness ahead of him.

And yet — he could not move.

"Feels like you pissed on an electric fence?" The old, maliciously dry voice issued from the darkness and the eyes. They moved closer and other lights came on to reveal a haunted-looking golum and William standing next to it, some kind of controller remote in one hand with a button pushed down.

"You should be more careful about what you wear and where you step but don't worry — I can't

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hold you with this for long." With that the golum strode ~~are~~ forward, stooped down and in one movement grasped Oneon in one hand and cut off his entire arm with the other.

Oneon screamed. William bent non-chalantly and picked up the arm, still transformed into a cannon, its barrel light having gone out it was now an empty cavity, a true ghost limb, severed from his body, he felt only pain where it should be and he sagged suddenly as the current holding him there shut off, drooping over the fist of the golum which covered his entire torso, the pointer finger coming to a close over the stump of his shoulder. William was holding the arm, staring at it. The cut end was violently burned, cauterized by whatever the golum was armed with. Oneon felt the room was too bright and William's voice sounded far away.

"Well," he was saying. "It will take a moment to power up all my equipment so that will give us a chance to chat as it were." He moved over to a stretcher-shaped table and set the arm down almost grudgingly as if it would climb away on its own. He then set about flicking various switches and Oneon heard machines whirring to life and was dimly aware that the laboratory's main room was adjacent to the cavern and completely open to it. William was talking, almost to



himself, as he moved about the room.

"I can't begin to fathom why she gave such a precious gift to a worthless orphan and not our own son. I admit you are something of the spitting image of our offspring but—"

"It's mine, my arm..."

"No no, that was never yours. She stole it. We developed it together. Ah those were the days. She wasn't my most brilliant student but boy she had passion—gumption! And where my ideas ran into a wall, she knew a way around it. Together we could do anything, SOLVE any problem. So why not solve every problem, make a single solution? Oh sure, you made it a weapon but Onyx was developed as a sort of God particle, if you'll allow me to use the old parlance, circuitry fused with cellular activity. If it could generate itself, it could generate anything! Infinite energy! Endless possibilities! ... " He trailed off, fingers clawing into the air what began as a hail to that glory. "And she ruined ... every thing. She took ... everything. Inside she was still a scared, greedy little girl, with our child, and I don't know, I thought she'd been taken, that someone had found out what we were working on." He typed into

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a keyboard and adjusted some instruments on the arm. "It was... inconceivable to me that she would run away and I was beside myself trying to find her. I was a wreck, I was wrecked. In fact the old William is lost somewhere in that past. I never could recreate what we had and so I simply set about perfecting what I knew. And here we are!" He pressed one more thing and turned to Oneon, a blurred figure, Oneon struggled to hold on and assumed he was smiling at him, but the expression was hidden or inscrutable.

"I'd ask if you had anything to say, but frankly I don't care to hear it and you're not long for this world. It may interest you to know that my son returned to me only moments before you arrived." Oneon perked up, almost violently - Bourné? Here? Part of William's plan? "Oh yes, he kept those pesty Kops from killing you. Mortals get so violent when they feel threatened, loyal help is hard to come by. Actually he's kept you alive at his own peril so that I could finally get what's mine. All the things we do for a father's love." Oneon winced against the stone grip, his head was on fire with rage. The arm, his arm was gone, but inside he found all the handles, all the choices were still there. What



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would happen if he used them.

"Anyway, let's see now about extracting my lovely invention." He clicked and clacked at a computer terminal as robotic arms and lenses adjusted Orin and began scanning it, cutting away the clothing, and injecting it with sensors.

Nothing happened. He was pulling on will power for a ghost limb, it was useless. He eased in his mind, he couldn't believe that his brother - no! He was not his blood! He was a traitor and it obviously ran in the family. He couldn't believe it, though, as much as he hated him and envied and was suspicious, beyond all that he truly believed Bourne would not cave in to madness, even if he was related. What about his allegiance to Ron, or was that a farce too? Was Hassan working with William? Did Ron know? Orin felt utterly betrayed and alone and angry and all he wanted now was to strike out, smash that pretentious old face, and make him feel the pain that he had felt his whole life, alone and unloved, surrounded by liars. So he pulled those handles within and again and again nothing happened, nothing happened.

"Hm... here? No, no... there? Where is it?"

William mumbled with increasing irritation. He turned

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angrily to Oneon who was now lucid enough to see William's face drawn into an intense glare. "You stupid kid, I will kill you with my bare hands!" He ran those hands through his <sup>own</sup> hair, squeezing his skull in frustration, and drawing his hair up into two wings as he threaded the fingers through. He grasped at Oneon's throat but could not make up his mind if he wanted to strangle him or beat his face. "You killed her and now no one knows. No one knows!"

"You killed her first," Oneon choked, glaring back, fire in his eyes, equal frustration. William had lost something. Oneon had lost something. They both felt trapped. William struck him across the face and immediately shook out his hand in pain.

"You insolent, worthless little idiot. I will dig it out of you, it must just be deeper than I thought. I will cut you to pieces!" An angry glee lit up his face like a flashlight shone from below. The lights flickered and his grin of insanity melted. "What the devil is—" And then it all went dark, there was a rumble like an earthquake and the lights drooped and wilted to blackness, the machines went off, but the golum



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kept his grip and it was tightening slowly, a vice. Onyx ~~he~~ did not know what or how William had commented it but he would certainly be squeezed to death and then dissected like a frog in biology class. He breathed out against his tightening chest, closed his eyes to the dark, and stepped into a slower time. Onyx was deeper, he must still have it, that meant something but he did not know what. He reentered the hall of his will power, those possibilities, and knew again that they were endless. You only lost freedom when you surrender it and that would not be him. He tested, he flexed, he pondered, which best for reverse, and he felt something that fit, that could not be described, that he could hardly predict like the unraveling of a dream that is new but familiar, expected, possibly planned in advance by the subconscious — played backwards while experienced forwards. He gathered this power to him and it seeped out of the golum, the machines, the earth, and the quake that preceded the power outage. Tendrils of the stuff, visible in a sense of inexplicable light sought him out and illuminated his grimace, William's chagrin, and the golum's indifference on its flat, expressionless face. The veins of light twisted

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and coalesced into the shape of an arm where his right one had been. William watched, stupified by fascination as the brightness faded and a new limb remained, unseen in the ~~new~~<sup>returned</sup> blackness.

"You," he whispered in smiling awe. That was the only word and the punctuation to the silence which ended in a reverberating kaboom and the shriek of shredded metal, the silhouette of a boy etched in white seared itself into William's retinas and blinded him but not before he saw this boy, this outline, extending both arms, and two cannons.

Chaos ensued. The mad scientist came out of his stupor in time to issue the right commands to defense, generators, and the golden white strangely laughing to himself, cackling even, as he fled behind counters that exploded under Oron's dual arm cannon fire. He punched his fists and fire emerged like a boxer or martial artist performing moves that were spells. Oron made quick work of the golum and all the sentry guns, smashed the last counter revealing William, and rushed forward to finish this once and for all. He saw red, he saw his target, he swung his arms in succession, a shimmer ran through him, and a double blast issued forth shaking and rattling the debris of the wrecked lab.



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But they did not find their mark.

"No, stop!" The voice behind the shield, Bourne, pleaded. He had gotten between Oneon and William.

"Betrayer!" Oneon yelled. "I'll kill you both!"

William had fled further and he continued cackling as the two brothers entered into a fierce combat.

He spoke as Oneon chased Bourne with fiery fury who kept using his great shield to deflect the blasts. "Yes! Fantastic! You can be anything and you chose a weapon, you're a weapon! My invention and my son, pitted against each other!"

Bourne yelled too, leaping over smashed equipment and just trying to stay ahead of Oneon. "stop! You don't understand brother, please!"

And Oneon yelled, oblivious to the other two. "Shut up, traitor! Liar! Just die! Die so this can be over!" Bourne tripped and fell back onto the floor, sliding slightly, shield raised. Oneon was there, furiously pumping his arms firing shot after shot that shook the room and melded with his yells and the shield was beaten away, Bourne's face revealed, the golden boy, haggard and sad.

"I remember you" he said.

Oneon halted in his death blow. He stared at Bourne in utter shock. The fire went out of his

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anger and into his memories. And there he saw Bourne, but not as now, not as he had ever recalled before. He saw Bourne bathed in a soft blue light. A baby Bourne, face full of wonder and love. And he remembered the love that filled him, that made him, that he molded... that he was born from. He wanted to be that boy full of love and wonder, and so he was. Bourne was his... was him? He had tried to start the same, the desire of a free idea was to become mortal, human, full of wonder and love or at least striving for those. The biology, the circumstance, had taken over, but he remembered his ideal, he remembered the root of infinite choices, and his choice remained.

He dropped to his knees, buried his face in his hands, and shook with the emotion throttling his body, the knowing that came with that opening. The catharsis of being loved and truly accepting it, finding its source and drinking it in. He did not cry. He swam in the endless river of unshed tears, against the current in his mind and held his breath, sank under it, and felt the choice he had always wanted but needed this realization to find. And then he let go, flailing, drowning in that current, was he dying? He heard screaming



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but he ignored it. There was pain and itching but it felt real and human and he welcomed it. He accepted weakness and mortality and loneliness, he loved them all, all of those attributes, and he could face them; he wouldn't be alone. When he raised his face from his hands... he saw they were flesh... human hands. And inside he had infinite choices still but he knew none of them could transform him, change his arm, or make him a walking weapon. He understood what ~~E~~ said about being the same, it was acceptance. He saw he had never been trapped, that our reaction is always ours to choose, there is no higher freedom. And he knew he had a brother who loved him and who, somewhat unfortunately, loved his father too. It was William who was screaming.

"Idiot!" William wrung his hands. "You could be anything, ANYTHING! And you joined the doomed humans! God damn!" He looked crossly at them and they noticed the severed arm in his hands and that he was holding a remote. "Both disappointments!" he said bitterly. "Well, ta ta!" He pressed a button and a tube sealed around him from ceiling to floor, there was a lot of mechanical sounds, it

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disappeared and so he was gone.

"Why did you save him?" O'neal asked. He felt bitter still and resentment boiled. Some things were not to change so instantly. ~~He~~ ~~he~~

"He is my - our father. I just couldn't let you kill him, I'm sorry." They were standing, Bourne put his hand on O'neal's shoulder.

O'neal nodded, "Okay."

## The End

But not ... really. There are a lot of details never revealed. Forge, the power source, destroyed by Ron, his death. Bourne's involvement and invention (the shield). Sam's child and her version of their relationship. Hassan's other suspects (Dr. Cain). The gypsies / immigrants assistance of William.

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Remember: This is a poorly-written sketch so that you could finish. And just as you did, more descriptions came, meaty details, and possible dialog. You'll fill all that in with inspiration and proper research. Now you deserve a break and rejoice just knowing you made it to the end.



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Unseen / Unwritten

☐ Ron saves Lilee from the Demo Man

☐ Bourne braves the junkyard on his own — using his shield against the dust bots

☐ Ron & Sam "duel" — this must be inserted somewhere earlier when it is not obvious that Ron is an ally.

☐ Bourne's "whistle" is in Onea's head — it is their link